

## Chapter 2

# A Self-Reflective Practitioner and a New Definition of Critical Participatory Action Research

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Susan Groundwater-Smith—the self-reflective practitioner in the title of this chapter—is not merely an advocate for practitioner inquiry, she is an exemplary model of the self-reflective practitioner. Ever since her days of primary teaching, when she discovered ideas and theories that could enliven and enlighten her educational work, she has continued to debate and critically interrogate not only her adversaries, her friends and the contemporary research literature, but also, and more doggedly, herself. She reveals something of this exemplary self-reflection in her *My Professional Self: Two Books, a Person and My Bedside Table* (Groundwater-Smith 2006). Only someone deeply respectful of ideas and their histories can deal with so many, with such dexterity, through so many years of confident scholarly writing, always leavening her educational scholarship with literary adornments drawn from the latest novel to impress her (as *My Professional Self...* shows), and always inviting readers into worlds made accessible by her lucid prose. She has always been a hard act to follow at a podium, and a hard co-author to work with as she so effortlessly (it seems) turns good sense into good sentences. As those who have written with her know, her writing flows from years of careful crafting. She is a practitioner par excellence of this special practice: the practice of inhaling rich observations of educational life (detailed in careful notes written up soon after), reflecting deeply on her own and others' educational experience, locating her ideas precisely in the current scholarship of teaching, and exhaling insightful writing about teaching that allows readers to see their worlds more clearly and understand them more deeply.

She has been, among many roles, a primary teacher, university teacher, professional developer, leader and mentor of research teams, professor, consultant, adviser and, at last, an eminent and distinguished scholar, also, of course, and not incidentally, a partner, a mother and a citizen of the world. And now, someone who, despite pretended retirement, continues to choreograph the living practice of the student-teachers who read her textbooks, the teachers and scholars who read her

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research books, articles and reports, and those of her friends and colleagues who have the good fortune to collaborate with her in projects in the Coalition of Knowledge-Building Schools, in work in museums and galleries, and in the variety of her research and writing projects that span the continents and bring together scholars from around the globe.

In this chapter, I will make a sally around just some aspects of Susan's work concerning practitioner inquiry, which I have also wrestled with, alongside her, for more than 30 years. She has been an outstanding advocate, model and leader in practitioner inquiry. Among other achievements, Susan has articulated and justified it for the profession, taught and nurtured it, drawn generations of practitioners into it, and given it an exemplary and organic home in the Coalition of Knowledge-Building Schools, to give just one example. While Susan was doing all this and more, I have tried, with Wilfred Carr, Robin McTaggart and many other colleagues, to find a more trenchant grounding for practitioner inquiry, in particular, in forms of action research that preserve a critical edge, and join the struggle to make all forms of schooling, at every level and location, more educational. By this I mean that I want to engender forms of practitioner inquiry—specifically, critical participatory action research—that will better support the enduring double task of education: to help individuals live well, and to help our societies create a world worth living in; that is, to initiate people, individually and collectively, into practices and forms of life that foster individual and collective self-development, self-expression and self-determination—and to initiate them into practices that enable them to strive to overcome practices and forms of life that unreasonably constrain individual and collective self-development, self-expression and self-determination.

In this chapter, then, I will give one distillation of one critical view of practitioner inquiry. I present a revised version of the definition of critical participatory action research first given in Nottingham in 2006 (Kemmis and Conlan 2006) at the annual conference of the *Collaborative Action Research Network*—an organisation with which Susan has long been associated. The definition is a little unusual: it is a single long sentence, with footnotes that gloss some of the substantial ideas the definition invokes.

After presenting the definition, I then make some connections between some of the notions it invokes and some of the intellectual projects that have characterised Susan's work—without, I hope, assimilating Susan's work to my own intellectual project of critical participatory action research, about which Susan undoubtedly has her own views, hesitations and critical reservations. *Pace*, Susan.

## **A New Definition of Critical Participatory Action Research**

The meaning of ideas is not fixed by definitions; debates about the nature or meaning of action research or critical participatory action research will not be ended by the definition proposed here. A longstanding definition of action research, which has the advantage of brevity, is this:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational *practices*, as well as their *understanding* of these practices and the *situations* in which these practices are carried out. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, p. 1; emphases added)

While this definition has the additional advantage of openness, it has the usual and obverse disadvantage of concise definitions: it leaves many of its presuppositions implicit.

The expanded definition proposed here aims to make some of the suppositions of ‘critical participatory action research’ explicit, and thus make apparent more of the theoretical, social and political commitments and underpinnings of this kind of action research. It may also reveal how critical participatory action research is oriented in the wider field of debates about the nature and significance of action research, and perhaps encourage people in the field to adopt a more encompassing view of action research. The definition may also make apparent how at least some critical participatory action researchers orient themselves towards the tasks of transformation that this kind of action research entails: transformations of work, workers and the worlds they inhabit; transformations of material-economic, cultural-discursive and social-political conditions and circumstances; and transformations of the knowledge, the skills and capacities, and the values and commitments of action researchers themselves.

The definition has six parts, each drawing attention to particular features and suppositions of this kind of action research, aiming to justify its claims to be ‘critical’ and ‘participatory’. The definition is a single, very long sentence, with key ideas explicated in footnotes. Some readers may prefer to read the whole definition first, and then read the footnotes elaborating it. Here, then, is the definition:

Critical participatory action research

1. is research undertaken collectively by participants in a social practice<sup>1</sup> to achieve ‘effective-historical consciousness’ (including both historical consciousness of

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<sup>1</sup> Schatzki (1996, 2002) argues that practices are ‘the site of the social’—features of ‘human co-existence’, and that they cannot be understood solely by understanding the intentional actions of individual persons. He argues that practices are social in nature—that they are collectively formed through social action in history, and differently inflected in particular places and times. If this is so, it follows that practices must be understood in terms of action and interaction in groups and collectivities as well as in terms of the action of individuals. Further, if action research is to grasp practice in its social as well as its individual features, then it will best be undertaken as both an individual and a collective process by those whose action and interactions constitute the practice. Moreover, to embrace the perspectives of those involved from the subject or participant perspective, each in relation to the others involved, action research cannot but involve those who are participants in the practice as participants in the research process, preferably from the inception of an action research initiative to its conclusion, preferably as the agents of the research (not as ‘objects’ or only as observers), and preferably together, as collective agents. This kind of involvement of participants in the research process has been an aspiration characteristic of action research since its beginnings (see e.g. Lewin 1952).

Advocates of understanding social life and work from the perspective of ‘communities of practice’ similarly emphasise the ‘situated knowledge’ of those involved (e.g. Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). It follows from these insights that the study of practices entails taking into account the interlocking perspectives of those whose activities collectively constitute the practice.

an historical object and of the historicity of the person interpreting it)<sup>2</sup> of their practice as *praxis*<sup>3</sup>—that is, as morally informed, committed action, oriented by

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It is not clear, however, whose activities in fact constitute a practice—only those involved in it at the moment, in this particular location, or those who have been and will be involved in and affected by it across the whole history of the practice, wherever they are? Given that the boundaries of the groups or collectivities involved in particular practices are frequently permeable and blurred, it might be better *not* to think of action research in terms of ‘projects’ with ‘members’, but instead in terms of ‘initiatives’ involving numbers of people who, at different times and in different locations may take different roles in reflecting on the practice and its formation and transformation (e.g. speaker, hearer, observer, actor, absentee). Such a view of critical participatory action research in public spheres has been advocated by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) and Kemmis (2005, 2006), based on Habermas’ writings on communicative action and public discourse in public spheres (Habermas 1984, 1987a, b, 1996, 2003c), on the view that, because practices are collectively formed, a rich understanding of social practices, and legitimate transformation of the practices, practitioners and practice settings involved, can only be achieved through open, fluid and *collective* discussion and will formation. This view gains further impetus from Habermas’ recognition that there is no single steering centre (and no self-regulating ‘macro-subject’) that can, on its own, instigate change in contemporary Western society (Habermas 2003c), but that change occurs as a result of diverse, often conflicting forces—that is, through contestation. The implication for action research, in order to enact constructive change, is that it should not only pursue self-realisation for individuals and organisations, but that it should also facilitate public debate among those involved in and affected by particular practices (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005).

<sup>2</sup> *Effective historical consciousness* (Gadamer 1975, pp. 267–269) is the ideal state in which an individual interprets a situation, taking into account its historical context, along with and alongside an interpretation of the historicity (the historical embeddedness of their own views in history) of their own beliefs (what Gadamer called their ‘prejudices’). This dialectic of consciousness and self-consciousness, though clearly difficult to achieve, is essential in reaching a rich interpretation of history and one’s own place in it—and especially for action researchers who aim to be self-conscious agents in history (particularly the situations and settings in which they act). Such understanding and self-understanding are intrinsic to *praxis* (see Carr 2006; on *praxis*, also see below).

Habermas (for a brief account, see Holub 1991) criticised Gadamer’s view that it is not possible to escape the boundaries of the tradition within which an interpreter interprets the world. Habermas argued that, on the contrary, it is possible, in the process of achieving historical self-consciousness (or effective-historical understanding) to identify *for critique* aspects of one’s own and others’ thought that have been distorted in the traditions of thought we have inherited, and to explore ways in which these inherited ideas may now be found to be irrational, unjust, unproductive, or in some way contributing to human suffering. Following this view, *critical* participatory action research aspires, through deepening historical understanding and self-understanding, to create conditions for critical reappraisal of the structures and practices embedded in particular traditions, cultures, discourses, social-political and economic relations, and impacts of human action on environments. Critical participatory action researchers aim to identify current irrationalities, injustices, dissatisfactions and suffering in the situations they inhabit; to ‘read’ them as possible consequences of past and continuing historical conditions and circumstances; and to act to ameliorate or overcome such consequences by changing the practices and conditions that produce them (Kemmis and Brennan Kemmis 2003). Furthermore, critical participatory action researchers aim to ‘read’ (monitor and reflect upon) the consequences of their own actions in history, to determine whether their own changed practices, changed ways of understanding things, or changed conditions and circumstances do in fact produce changed and better consequences (‘better’ in the senses that they are less irrational, less unjust, less unsatisfactory, or less inclined to cause suffering).

<sup>3</sup> While *praxis* has frequently been understood as a property of *individual* action and actors, it also has a *collective* face in the collective *history-making action* of people whose actions collectively

- tradition, that responds wisely to the needs, circumstances and particulars of a practical situation, and as *history-making action* that is aware that it will have consequences for all those involved and affected by it—and that this effective-historical consciousness is to be achieved not only by each as an individual but especially through collective deliberation aimed at collective self-understanding
2. as a process in which participants reflect critically<sup>4</sup> and self-critically<sup>5</sup> on

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make the future conditions enjoyed or endured by communities, nations and co-inhabitants of the earth (Kemmis 2009, 2010). In contemporary times, the significance of *praxis* has been diminished by the contemporary preoccupation with *technē* (technical, instrumental or functional knowledge, reasoning and action). This preoccupation deprives practitioners of richer understandings of the moral purpose and historical significance and consequences of their work (Aristotle 2003; Carr 2005, 2006; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Dunne 1993, 2005; Gauthier 1963; Kemmis 2005, 2010; Kemmis and Smith 2008; Schwandt 2005; Saugstad 2005).

Critical participatory action research fosters the collective reflection on the shared consequences of collective action and interactions, making possible *collective praxis*—that is, doing guided by shared understandings and self-understandings of participants generated through *communicative action* (Habermas 1984, 1987a, b, 1996, 2003c), which Habermas describes as shared practical reflection and deliberation aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do (see below on *communicative space*).

<sup>4</sup> Participants aim to reflect *critically*, unravelling problems in order to reveal their causes—that is, exploring how perspectives, social structures and practices have evolved in ways that produce some undesirable consequences. In the tradition of critical theory and its successors (e.g. Horkheimer 1972, Habermas 1972, 2003c), critical participatory action research proposes acting negatively against the identified causes of these consequences (i.e. against irrationality, injustice, dissatisfactions and suffering), as opposed to acting positively to achieve some state of being that appears ideal (in the ‘progressive’ Enlightenment tradition fostered by Auguste Comte’s ‘positivism’ of the mid 19th century).

<sup>5</sup> The notion of reflecting *self-critically* embraces Gadamer’s (1975) ‘effective-historical consciousness’ in the sense of consciousness of one’s own historicity, but goes beyond it in the sense that it aims to discover irrationality, injustice, or causes of dissatisfaction or suffering, not only as a consequence of tradition or historically given conditions or circumstances, but also in the conduct and consequences of one’s own ways of thinking, acting and relating to others. Moreover, by considering the possibility of collective agency and collective *praxis*, critical participatory action research envisages not only an ‘I’ who is an actor and agent but also a ‘we’ (for example, people enmeshed together in a particular practice) who are collective actors and agents (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988), who can reflect together on practical situations confronting us, and make critical appraisals not only of conditions and circumstances historically given to us but also of our mutual conduct and its consequences.

In light of Habermas’ (1987a, 1996, 2003c) critique of the social ‘macro-subject’ (a social totality understood as a self-regulating whole) and of *praxis philosophy* (that envisaged a self-steering state acting on behalf of the social totality), however, critical participatory action research can no longer regard participants as a bounded ‘collective’ (or as an enclosed ‘project group’) as if this group could act in an entirely self-regulating way without regard for perspectives of or the consequences for others (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Against this totalising view (and taking a lead from Heidegger and others), Habermas (e.g. 1998, 2001, 2002, 2003a, c) invokes the notion of *intersubjectivity* as opening a space in which participants’ perspectives and proposals for action can be mutually explored through *communicative action*. In this conception, neither the individual *subject* nor a social whole is totalised as actor or agent; instead, plurality and diversity (and recognition of and respect for others as subjects like oneself) are acknowledged and understood as ‘in play’ in communicative spaces where participants meet one another to reach shared understandings about the world, each other and themselves (their own ways of thinking, acting and relating).

- their *praxis* as individual and collective participants in the practice (recognising the risk that some of their actions may turn out to have untoward effects or longer-term consequences),
  - their historically formed and intersubjectively shared *understandings* of the practice (recognising that, in the light of their consequences, some of their understandings may turn out to be self-deceived or ideologically distorted), and
  - the historically formed cultural-discursive, social-political and material-economic fields that constitute the *conditions* of their practice and the *situations and setting* in which their practice is conducted (recognising that some of these local conditions, situations and settings may turn out to have untoward effects);
3. by opening communicative space<sup>6</sup>—that is, space for collective reflection and self-reflection through communicative action aimed at intersubjective agree-

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This is to adopt an *unbounded* notion of both singular and social selves, seeing the individual as a (changing, developing) participant in conversations that develop and continue through time, and social ‘selves’ as constituted in communicative spaces that similarly develop and continue. On this view, an action research ‘project’ might better be understood as a conversation-space in which proposals for action are discussed, decisions about what to do are reached, and the actions taken are deliberately (monitored and) evaluated in the light of their consequences (against criteria of rationality and the validity of knowledge in the semantic dimension; justice and solidarity in the social dimension; and in terms of the integrity, capability and identity of persons in the dimension of historical time; Habermas 1992, pp. 343–344).

<sup>6</sup> As suggested earlier, the notion of *communicative space* refers to spaces in which people encounter each other reciprocally, as subjects worthy of recognition and respect, as *subjects*. Communicative spaces are spaces in which people consciously try to reach *intersubjective* agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do. The notion of communicative space embodies the inclusive, collective, transformative aims of critical participatory action research. As an ideal (although always challenged by power asymmetries which threaten its achievement), the process of communicative action involves people together seeking understanding and consensus about what to do by speaking freely and opening themselves up to creative, responsive, democratic approaches to problems (Habermas 1987b, 1996, 2003c; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). In an earlier formulation (Habermas 1979) of ‘communicative competence’ and ‘the ideal speech situation’, Habermas had emphasised three (sometimes four) ‘validity claims’—‘truth’ in the sense of accuracy, sincerity or truthfulness, and moral rightness or appropriateness (and sometimes adding comprehensibility). Later (1996), after the publication of the *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984, 1987a), and recognising that agreement about these was only possible when people were *in communication* with others, he drew attention (Habermas 1987b and especially 1996, Chap. 8) to the role of communicative action in *opening communicative space* between people—the space of *intersubjectivity* (which plays an important role in some of his more recent works, including Habermas 1998, 2002, 2003a, b, c). Opening communicative space, in turn, depends on our use of language as a tool for reaching understanding. Describing the linguistic grounding of intersubjectivity in *The Future of Human Nature* (Habermas 2003a), he writes:

As historical and social beings we find ourselves always already in a linguistically structured lifeworld. In the forms of communication through which we reach an understanding with one another about something in the world and about ourselves, we encounter a transcending power. Language is not a kind of private property. No one possesses exclusive

ment, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do—in which participants can strive together, subjectively and intersubjectively, to reach shared insights into and decisions about what to do in relation to the nature and historical formation of their practice in terms of

- how their practice has evolved over time in its intertwined (and sometimes contradictory or contested) cultural-discursive, social, material-economic and personal dimensions<sup>7</sup>, and
- themes and issues that arise as common concerns as a consequence of the tensions and interconnections within and between their shared *lifeworlds* (that provide content and resources constituted in the shared *logos* of language and shared background assumptions in the cultural dimension, solidarities in the social dimension, and competences and capacities in the personal dimension), on the one hand, and, on the other, the administrative and economic *systems* that structure and constrain possibilities for their action in the situation<sup>8</sup>; and

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rights over the common medium of the communicative practices we must intersubjectively share. No single participant can control the structure, or even the course, of processes of reaching understanding and self-understanding. How speakers and hearers make use of their communicative freedom to take yes- or no-positions is not a matter of their subjective discretion. For they are free only in virtue of the binding force of the justifiable claims they raise towards one another. The *logos* of language embodies the power of the intersubjective, which precedes and grounds the subjectivity of speakers.

...The *logos* of language escapes our control, and yet we are the ones, the subjects capable of speech and action, who reach an understanding with one another in this medium. It remains ‘our’ language. The unconditionedness of truth and freedom is a necessary presupposition of our practices, but beyond the constituents of ‘our’ form of life they lack any ontological guarantee. Similarly, the ‘right’ ethical self-understanding is neither revealed nor ‘given’ in some other way. It can only be won in common endeavour. From this perspective, what makes our being-ourselves possible appears more as a transsubjective power than an absolute one. (pp. 10–11)

<sup>7</sup> In order to devise solutions to substantial problems and issues (like contemporary problems of sustainability in the face of global warming, or the loss of meaning and significance from the work of professional practitioners caused by the functionalist reasoning that bedevils contemporary policy processes in almost every field of human endeavour), we must look beyond immediate goals, roles, rules, functions and outcomes to the conditions that make these goals, roles, rules, functions and outcomes possible. Critical participatory action research aims to create spaces in which participants can explore the (profoundly intertwined) *cultural-discursive, social-political, material-economic and personal* origins and dimensions of problems in order to make possible the reconstruction of the collective and individual practices implicated in producing such problems (Kemmis 2005, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Habermas (1984, 1987a, b) argues that, in late modernity, contemporary social *systems*, steered in the media of money and administrative power, have become ‘relatively autonomous’ of the *lifeworlds* in which social life is anchored (in culture and discourses in the semantic dimension; in social integration and solidarities in the social dimension; and in the integrity, capability and identity of persons in the dimension of historical time). These media-steered social systems, necessary to late modern social organisation, have become ‘relatively autonomous’ of lifeworlds because of the functional reason characteristic of their operation—that is, they are framed and fuelled by organisational or institutional goals, roles, rules, functions and outcomes measured principally in terms of money, profit and administrative power. Being steered by these immediate concerns, they

4. by intervening in their unfolding collective history through exploratory action to investigate their shared reality in order to transform it<sup>9</sup> and to transform their reality in order to investigate it<sup>10</sup>, that is, by making changes in what they do and gathering evidence of the observable conduct and historical consequences of their actions for different people and groups involved and affected in terms of the cultural-discursive, social, material-economic and personal character, conduct and consequences of the practice,
5. with the practical aim of acting rightly (in terms of moral appropriateness) and with wisdom (based on critically interpreted tradition and experience) and pru-

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increasingly cut across the lifeworld functions of reproduction and transformation of cultures and societies, and the formation and transformation of the integrity, capability and identities of persons—lifeworld processes that are necessary to sustain cultures, societies and persons. An effect is that the integrity of cultures, societies and persons seems somehow overlooked, forgotten or even denied from the perspective of social systems *qua* system, although from its own perspective, an organisation may merely be taking a neutral stance on questions of the integrity of cultures, societies and persons.

On the other hand, given the pervasiveness of organisations in the constitution of late modern life, systems increasingly ‘colonise’ lifeworld relationships, bringing the content and manner of their operations into spaces like family and community life and the discussion spaces of civic society. A consequence is that people increasingly regard themselves in the roles of ‘client’ (in relation to the steering medium of administrative power) and ‘consumer’ (in relation to the steering medium of money). Habermas argues that contemporary social life is characterised by *boundary-crises* that arise at the points where organisations (systems) and lifeworlds intersect—at times when the needs on the two ‘sides’ are more or less incompatible. Social movements may arise, more or less spontaneously, in response to some of these boundary-crises—as in the case of the green movement which has arisen in response to various environmental crises induced by the operation of contemporary agribusiness, industrial pollution and systems of energy production and use.

Arguably, critical participatory action research has a natural ‘home’ in such social movements, in the organisation of will-formation and decisions about how to respond at local as well as global levels to contemporary crises (Kemmis 2000, 2001; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Arguably, too, critical participatory action research has a role in exploring boundary-crises at the intersections of systems (organisations) and lifeworlds, if and when systems transfer the burden of their operation to lifeworlds—for example, when participants experience a sense of loss of meaning (or incomprehensibility), justification or legitimacy, or in the form of irrationality, injustice, dissatisfactions or suffering. Acting either as participants in or observers of systems and lifeworlds, critical participatory action researchers may thematise such problems for discussion, consider alternative courses of action to address them, and take action to ameliorate or overcome them (monitoring and reflecting upon the conduct and consequences of their actions).

<sup>9</sup> See Fals Borda (1979).

<sup>10</sup> Critical participatory action research advocates *exploratory interventions*, that is, making changes during the course of individual and collective practice in order to improve it, as opposed to only passively intervening in practice after problems have arisen (Dewey 1916; Kemmis and Brennan Kemmis 2003). It aims to take communicative action into social practice, using social practice and practical and critical reflections on the consequences of practice as a source of new understandings and future reflection (Habermas 1987a; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005). Critical participatory action researchers make critical analyses of practice/*praxis* using a range of perspectives in order to create shared understandings of and orientations to social reality, with the intention of *transforming* social realities (Fals Borda 1979; Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005) so that they may become less irrational, less unjust and less inhumane.



dence in response to a current issue or concern that confronts them in their particular situation<sup>11</sup>; and, in addition to this,

6. with the emancipatory aims<sup>12</sup> of eliminating, as far as possible, character, conduct or consequences that are untoward, distorted, destructive or unsustainable because they are
  - irrational (discursively unsustainable),
  - unjust (causing or supporting domination or oppression)<sup>13</sup>, alienating or excluding (morally and socially unsustainable),
  - unproductive (materially economically unsustainable), or
  - the unjustifiable causes of suffering or dissatisfaction for particular persons or groups

and of enhancing participants' capacity for collective historical action, often in the context of social movements<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The aim of *practical* reason—reasoning about what Reid (1978) calls “uncertain practical questions”—is *praxis* or right conduct in response to a particular situation (wise and prudent action, frequently oriented by traditions of thought and debate about relevant issues). Practical reason views both ends and means of action as problematic, and aims to equip people (as agents) with better ways of understanding action (*phronēsis*) and greater capacities for moral action (*praxis*) (Aristotle 2003; Carr and Kemmis 1986; Carr 2006). Action researchers conduct research into their action in parallel with *doing* whatever it is they are doing in order to enhance *praxis* for both the good of individuals and the good for humankind.

<sup>12</sup> Critical participatory action research aims to liberate people from harmful constraints (often historically given, whether given by tradition, or by social or economic or material conditions and circumstances)—from irrationality or lack of justification in the cultural-discursive dimension; from injustice and illegitimacy in the social dimension; and from suffering and dissatisfaction in the material-economic dimension. Collaborative reflection and theorising via critical reasoning helps participants determine how a situation has arisen and engages them in political action directed towards an *emancipatory reconstruction* of the setting (Habermas 1972, 1974, 1975). In the context of education, for example, policy makers and teachers could use less prescriptive, less instrumental ways of assessing students' learning, thereby contributing to the development of less alienating, less controlled educational settings and less marginalised, less uninspired learners (Freire 1970a, b).

<sup>13</sup> The tenet that every person is of equal value by virtue of *being* a person is at the heart of critical participatory action research, hence its commitment to collaborative reflection and action, and to the *abolition of social injustice* (Horkheimer 1972; Habermas 2003c). For example, valuing students of minority cultures equally with students of majority cultures, as reflected in both the curriculum and in the way teachers conduct their classes, will help to build a less intolerant, less unjust school community. Young (1990) argues that injustice consists in domination and oppression—arguing that *domination* is constituted by social structures or practices that unreasonably constrain *self-determination*, and that *oppression* (in the five distinctive forms of exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence) is constituted by social structures or practices that unreasonably constrain *self-expression* and *self-development*.

<sup>14</sup> Critical participatory action research has the universal aim of building a better world via engagement in communicative forms of life and, sometimes, collective historical action through *social movements* (Touraine 1981; Habermas 1987a, b, 1996). Arguably, critical participatory action research initiatives in education aimed at reconstructing schools to be less irrational, unjust, unsatisfactory and unsustainable, will result in wider communities and societies which are more rational, just, inclusive, satisfying and sustainable.

## An Accidental Practitioner of Critical Participatory Action Research?

In recent years, Susan has described the kind of teacher research she advocates as ‘practitioner inquiry’ although her writings are also to be found in the pages of volumes about ‘educational action research’ (e.g. the three-volume *Action Research in Education*, edited by Campbell and Groundwater-Smith 2010). She has also written (e.g. Groundwater-Smith 1988) about different kinds of action research—technical, practical and emancipatory action research (using the distinctions promulgated by Habermas 1972 and Carr and Kemmis 1986). And she has consistently maintained that practitioner inquiry should be critical and emancipatory—from her chapter in Nias and Groundwater-Smith (1988) to her recent plea, together with Nicole Mockler (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009), for teachers to be critical of the conditions of education and schooling, to be courageous about addressing the problems education confronts today, and, as professionals, being activist about making changes that can overcome some of the problems of schooling today.

I doubt that Susan has ever described herself as a ‘critical participatory action researcher’: the label is more cumbersome than she could accept, I think, on the grounds of style alone. But the evidence of her writings over the years—her *oeuvre*—suggests that she shares many of the commitments which I think are characteristic of critical participatory action research as I have defined it here. Perhaps, then, she might best be described as an *accidental* practitioner and advocate of critical participatory action research. Shortly, I will use the six parts of the definition presented here to explore this proposition.

Before proceeding, however, it is worth recalling that Susan has been advocating teacher inquiry for more than 30 years. In Groundwater-Smith and Nicholl (1980), she published *Evaluation in the Primary School*, drawing together ideas about and resources for teacher and school self-evaluation gathered from her experience supporting schools to conduct (self-)evaluations in the Australian Government’s Disadvantaged Schools Program (which provided schools with additional resources for school programs to address the needs of disadvantaged students). Eight years later, following the burgeoning of university courses involving teachers in enquiries into their own practice, with Jennifer Nias, she co-edited and contributed to *The Enquiring Teacher: Supporting and Sustaining Teacher Research* (Nias and Groundwater-Smith 1988). And her advocacy of teacher enquiry continues in the best-selling texts for prospective teachers she has written with several longstanding collaborators (Groundwater-Smith et al. 2007, 2009—as well as the earlier editions of each). Susan has written about and taught practitioner inquiry for at least these 30 years, and she continues to support teachers in schools, universities and other institutions in the process. On the basis of this evidence, it is not unreasonable to describe her as an action researcher, on the grounds of both her advocacy and her practice. But what kind of an action researcher?

In the sections that follow, I aim to show that Susan has advocated views about practitioner inquiry that highlight matters also crucial to critical participatory action

research. Robin McTaggart and I (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 2005) have come to insist upon this cumbersome label to describe the kind of action research we most want to encourage; we want to distinguish it from action research which does not engage groups of people in the collective examination of their own practices, which is implemented in the service of ‘school improvement’ as this is defined in government policies; and which does not challenge the conditions which irrationally, unjustly and unproductively constrain teachers’ understandings, their work and their workplaces. The definition of critical participatory action research I have presented in this chapter further clarifies some of the central features of my understanding of this form of action research. Using terms associated with the six parts of the definition as prompts, I will comment briefly on aspects of Susan’s work that seem to me to show affinities with critical participatory action research. I will not, however, ask Susan to endorse this interpretation of her work.

### *Practice, Praxis, Effective-Historical Consciousness*

In 2006, reflecting on her ‘professional self’ (Groundwater-Smith 2006), Susan demonstrated her commitment to improving her own practice as a teacher and researcher, showing an acute awareness of herself as formed in a particular history, as shaped by particular books and by her engagement with the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. She reported that the writing of the chapter had made her feel vulnerable to the gaze of readers, but she determined, through the drafting process, that she would portray herself openly despite this feeling. Her commitments, to social justice, for example, and some of her enthusiasms (for a great variety of interesting books, for instance) are on display. She also chooses a person—Stenhouse—to exemplify a guiding purpose and informing spirit for her work over the last 30 years. She locates herself as modernist in the stream of contemporary theory and literature. And through these gestures she reveals her own effective-historical consciousness—her knowledge of herself as formed by a tradition, as within the tradition, and as a contributor to the continuation and development of the tradition—as shaped by, and shaping, the tradition that valorises and supports the teacher as researcher.

She has been a self-evaluating teacher and a teacher-researcher for most of her career, before her university career as well as throughout it. What makes her so different from others within the practice tradition of the teacher-researcher, however, is that she has also been an articulate advocate for the tradition, deliberately intervening in the initial and continuing education of educators to ensure that it produces autonomous and activist professionals capable of maintaining and developing education despite the diminished conditions of schooling in ‘an age of compliance’ (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009). In short, Susan remains aware of her person, her profession and her work as products of history and tradition, and also as interventions into histories and traditions. In these senses, she is committed not only to *praxis* in the sense of the ‘right conduct’ of Aristotle, but also in terms of the collective ‘history-making action’ of Hegel and Marx: she acts not only

alone, but in dialogue and solidarity with others with whom she shares collective responsibility for the good of the practice of education, the good of the education profession, and the good for humankind. One demonstration of her understanding of the sweep of history and of scholarship in participant inquiry and action research—locating the historicity of contemporary action researchers—is in her editorship (with Anne Campbell) of the three volume *Action Research in Education* (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith 2010), which surveys the history and diversity of action research.

Of course Susan does not act only as a teacher-researcher and advocate of teacher research. She also acts in relation to the conditions of the profession and the practice of education. She is aware of the historicity of schooling, and intervenes to propose policy responses to the needs of the practice and the profession at particular moments. Responding at a particular moment to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) consultation on the future of public education, for example, she and I proposed forms of participant inquiry and partnership with universities appropriate for the continuing professional development of teachers in New South Wales at the time (Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis 2005). In this and many other evaluations (like our evaluation of the NSW DET Priority Action Schools Program, Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis 2004) and when she is invited to advise on policies and programmes, she intervenes as a critically conscious activist professional in the history of education.

### ***Critical and Self-Critical Reflection***

On the basis of what has already been said, it is clear that Susan shares the critical participatory action researcher's commitment to critical and self-critical reflection. In 1988, for example, she advocated this commitment in her chapter in the Nias and Groundwater-Smith (1988) edited volume, especially adopting a critical view about the extent to which enquiry-based approaches in teacher education courses actually adopted a critical perspective or an emancipatory commitment to transforming teacher education and the continuing professional development of teachers. Among many, many other examples, she and Nicole Mockler provide advice and examples for teachers beginning critical and self-critical enquiry in their own schools and classrooms in Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2003) *Learning to Listen: Listening to Learn*.

### ***Communicative Space***

Groundwater-Smith and Sachs (2002) cite Gutmann and Thompson (1996) on deliberative democracy as a model for the 'activist professional' who engages in deliberations with others about how to overcome injustice and irrationality in a society.

In turn, Gutmann and Thompson (2004) acknowledge Jürgen Habermas as a key source for their notion of deliberative democracy. They say (referring specifically to Habermas 1996):

More than any other theorist Jürgen Habermas is responsible for reviving the idea of deliberation in our time, and giving it a more thoroughly democratic foundation. His deliberative politics is firmly grounded in the idea of popular sovereignty. The fundamental source of legitimacy is the collective judgement of the people. (Gutmann and Thompson 2004, p. 9)

The ideal of deliberative democracy is also continuous with Stenhouse's (1975) notion of 'extended professionals' engaging in research into her own teaching, where research is defined as Stenhouse (1979, p. 7) defined it, namely, as "systematic enquiry made public...for criticism and utilization within a particular research tradition". This image of a profession deliberating together about how its work should be done remains at the core of the notion of the 'activist professional' (Sachs 2000, 2003) and it is continuously present or presupposed in Susan's work from her early writing to the most recent (e.g. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009).

Not only does Susan want the voices of professional teachers involved in these deliberations. For some years now, she has also advocated 'student voice' within the deliberations about how education should proceed (e.g. Groundwater-Smith 2007). She is aware, however, of the dangers that school students can be unequal partners in these deliberations, and so she proposes a variety of precautions to ensure 'the right to say no' in informed consent about their participation in discussions of the teaching they observe, and the need for anonymity and confidentiality in reporting their views to teachers and schools.

In at least these ways, then—for teachers and for students—Susan envisages conditions in which communicative space is opened for deliberation about education and schooling, another aspect of the kind of practice characteristic of critical participatory action research.

### ***Exploratory Action: Investigating Reality in Order to Transform It; Transforming Reality in Order to Investigate It***

Teachers influenced by Susan's writings are researchers who explore possibilities for their practice through their research. She draws upon and cites with approval (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2009) Dewey's *Democracy and Education* and its advocacy of exploration through a version of scientific method he describes. This kind of exploration involves active intervention to learn what consequences follow from changes made. And it is clear from accounts of the work of the Coalition of Knowledge-Building Schools (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler 2002, 2009) that she helped to establish, that she and her teacher-researcher colleagues in a number of participating schools are indeed investigating their school and classroom realities in order to transform them, and transforming those realities in order to investigate them. This, too, is an aspiration shared with critical participatory action research.

## *A Practical Aim*

The practical aim of critical participatory action research is to orient and inform action—to answer the kinds of questions that can only be answered by doing something. To cite just a couple of examples in which I have been involved with Susan and others, she has written extensively to inform teachers, consultants, policy-makers and others about lessons learned from practice that suggest how a wise practitioner might proceed, and what a wise policy might be for particular kinds of circumstances and exigencies. Thus, for example, and with various co-authors, she has made practical suggestions and recommendations about what could be learned from the experience of the NSW DET *Priority Action Schools program* which provided additional funding and staff support for 72 NSW schools in especially challenging circumstances (Beveridge et al. 2005; Groundwater-Smith and Kemmis 2005). The recommendations of these and other studies Susan has conducted—often not acted upon—have the practical aim of improving the quality of educational experiences for teachers, students, schools and communities. But she remains fearless about giving the advice—as the next section suggests.

## *An Emancipatory Aim*

In 1988, thinking about teacher enquiry in award-bearing courses, Susan questioned whether it is possible that teacher enquiry could be conducted by critical communities of co-equal participants oriented by an emancipatory aim. Although she thought that the kind of relationships between participants in award-bearing courses did not, in general, overcome the asymmetries of power between teachers on these courses (who also assessed the students) and the students, she nevertheless concluded that it might be possible to arrange things so that the effects of the asymmetry could be mitigated. The tension between the emancipatory aspiration and the presupposition of open communication is always present, as Susan noted at the time. She also thought that teacher research more generally could overcome these asymmetries in collaborative work to investigate and improve education and teaching. She writes:

The impetus is towards empowerment of the knower to perceive the genesis and evolution of ideas in sociohistorical space, and having thus, identified them to understand their consequences upon individuals and groups, students, teachers and parents.... (p. 259)

As Susan described it, the aim of an emancipatory aspiration interest is to free the knower (a teacher, for example) from the constraints of dogma—ideas that have come to be taken for granted on the basis of tradition or custom, and that have untoward consequences for all or some people and groups in a setting or a society. She acknowledges that this is always difficult, and that attempts at emancipation always fall short of the ideal—achieving a perfectly rational and just society, for example. But, as this suggests, she nevertheless embraced the aspiration towards emancipatory.

Written about in that formal way, emancipation—as emancipation from dogma or irrationality and injustice—seems somehow elusive and idealistic. In practice, however, people do come across sources of felt dissatisfaction, unequally shared untoward consequences, and ideas that appear to justify the ill-treatment of some groups—as, for example, when they encounter the consequences of discrimination. There are ideas that harm us when they are made manifest and dangerous in action—ideas that other human beings can be treated as sub-human or non-human, for example. Susan has long been among those arguing that teachers should investigate whether their actions are based on sound ideas, and that they should strive to recognise and include those who risk exclusion.

Nowhere is the emancipatory thread in Susan’s work more evident, however, than in her recent book with Nicole Mockler (2009), *Teacher Professional Learning in an Age of Compliance*. The book discusses challenges to the teaching profession in an ‘audit culture’—the challenges of standardisation, the erosion of teacher judgement in the face of standards in curriculum and teaching, and the widespread use of national testing to monitor the performance of schools and teachers, for example. The book is a call to action for the profession—a call to inquiry-based professional learning as a way of understanding and overcoming the contemporary problems faced by the teaching profession. Under the pressures now faced by the profession, they argue, teachers need to think and act collectively through inquiry-based professional learning to recover and revive their educational work.

The book gives an account of some of the felt dissatisfactions experienced by teachers today, and identifies how they are the consequence of irrational arrangements made by education systems—in the form of policies and procedures which undermine the professional judgement and work of teachers—and the unjust consequences of such policies—the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and outcomes by socioeconomic status, for example. Its emancipatory aspirations are at one with those of the kind of critical participatory action research advocated by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) as well as in the definition of critical participatory action research offered in this chapter.

## Conclusion

Despite the suggestive evidence presented here, of course, I cannot reasonably claim that Susan is a critical participatory action researcher or an advocate of critical participatory action research. As far as I know, she has not described herself that way—and no doubt (given her critical cast of mind) she has reservations about my definition and some of the literatures that I have adduced in support of it. To the extent that she can be called a critical participatory action researcher, then, it may only be for the ‘accidental’ and contingent reason that she happens to hold some of the same views that I regard as crucial in this approach to action research.

This is not the only time we have turned out to hold similar views. We have done so on a range of matters for many years—since first I met her soon after I returned

to Australia from the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom more than 30 years ago, where I had been working with, among others, Lawrence Stenhouse—the person she nominates as a key influence in her (2006) autobiographical self-reflection. (He influenced me, too.) During those 30 years, we have had some wonderful conversations, and from time to time we have worked together on very interesting projects. Most significantly, we have shared an enduring commitment to teacher research on the grounds of our mutual conviction that education cannot change without teachers and the teaching profession driving educational change—even if others (students, communities and sometimes university academics, for example) may in their turn coax or influence teachers to change. Over the years, Susan has extended that participatory principle to include students, and fostered her long advocacy for student voice in educational research—a principle that I also endorse in the interests of inclusion of those most involved in and affected by teaching as a practice.

As many others also find, conversations with Susan are explorations of things about which we agree and sometimes disagree, and of the chasms that can suddenly open when she fixes attention on some idea that had previously seemed solid enough to stand on. Such conversations are the meat and drink of an academic life. This chapter aims to be, for me, another stage in our 30-year conversation: another topic to be looked at from different angles, poked and prodded, and its fate decided.

For all of us, conversation is the point: it is in practical and critical conversations that we meet one another, share ideas, reach agreements and understandings, and decide what to do. In the case of critical deliberations, it is also to decide how to act not just in our own interests but in the interests of humankind. In a career of practical and critical deliberations, Susan has reflected deeply on education and her place in it, and on the basis of that reflection she has *acted* on behalf of students, teachers, the profession and the discipline of Education. She exemplifies the *phronēsis*—the wisdom borne of experience—of the person who has learned from life. As a teacher, as a teacher educator, as an advocate for the disadvantaged, as a researcher, and as an advocate for education, she exemplifies the virtues of the self-reflective practitioner.

May the conversations continue.

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