

Developing a System for Collaborative Teacher Education Action Research in International Settings: Representative Research in Progress in Mongolia

Candace Kaye
New Mexico State University
kaye@nmsu.edu

Abstract

Action research in teacher preparation programs has been evolving over several decades. However, a robust international supportive process is still only in the beginning stages within teacher preparation communities. This presentation reports on an organized and maintained international venue in Mongolia for participatory investigations relating to teaching, learning, collaboration, policy, and practice in teacher education as reflected in action research projects. Conceptualization, content, and contexts of international issues in teacher education action research make up the first part of the discussion. The ongoing study is then presented as a systematic investigation for the purpose of building and sustaining a faculty research community in Mongolia's only teacher training university. The case for the international action research in teacher education network is based on the knowledge that conceptual frameworks are imperative to keep abreast of globalization of policy and practice.

Keywords

Education reform, participatory research, higher education, teacher education, learning communities.

Introduction

The last decade has been characterized by large-scale reforms of educational systems, including initial planning for organized and accessible professional development of teacher educators. Unfortunately, such efforts are often ineffective and unsustainable, relying on traditional teacher-centered, didactic pedagogy that emphasizes passive rather than active learning (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Anderson, 1997; Heyneman, 1993; Tessema, 2007).

The ongoing study reported on here systematically investigates how to build and sustain a faculty research community in Mongolia's only teacher training university. Specifically, this internationally collaborative process promotes use of action research to support (a) public good within a participatory context and (b) educational reform as an agent rather than the object of change in an attempt to answer the underlying research question, "How can an international action research network for teacher educators

(a) provide individual and collaborative support for action research scholarship, (b) build a sustained and supportive network for active learning, modeling, and transmitting innovative action research while supporting the (c) use of culturally based approaches and perspectives for teaching and learning in teacher education?”.

The collaborative project with the support of a foreign scholar has created opportunities to apply theoretically based action research processes within a previously marginalized higher education community with limited access to a variety of methodologies. The project studies the collaboration needed to create and implement a shared vision for the use of action research in order to learn better ways to enhance participatory learning as a result of action research projects (McTaggart, 1997). To that end, the International Professional Community Working Team meets on a regular basis to discuss professional development learning community needs, including topics generated by university interest, organization of pedagogy, and development of an action research program that may lead not only to reform but also to the creation of a presence in the international educational research community.

Community building within the project is based on the Community of Practice (CoP) model (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, the focus is on learning and shared leadership in action research in teacher education, which includes (a) commitment to planning, presentation of publishable papers on a regular basis of implemented teacher education action research projects of Mongolian university faculty and students, (b) international discussions within scheduled network

forums, and (c) subsequent collaborative conference presentations and publications. The specific CoP model used includes the three principles of social presence, motivation, and collaboration.

Social Presence

Communicating with others in a community of practice involves creating *social presence*. Tu (2002) defined social presence as “the degree of salience of another person in an interaction and the consequent salience of an interpersonal relationship” (p. 38). Additionally, social presence is believed to affect how likely an individual is to participate in a CoP (especially in technologically based environments) (Tu, 2002).

Motivation

Motivation to share knowledge is critical to success in a community of practice. Studies show that members are motivated to become active participants in a CoP when they view knowledge as meant for the public good, a moral obligation, and/or as a community interest (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003).

Collaboration

Collaboration is essential to ensuring that communities of practice thrive. Certain factors have been found to indicate a higher level of collaboration in knowledge exchange within a network (Sveiby & Simon, 2002). For example, Sveiby and Simons found that more seasoned colleagues tend to foster a more collaborative culture. Additionally, they noted that a higher educational level also predicts a tendency to favor collaboration.

Description of Purpose

The purpose of the study is to develop an ongoing network for the creation,

implementation, and sustainability of an international professional development action research community in Mongolia. Specifically, the network includes the building of an international, culturally sensitive professional development learning community for teacher educators (a) to discuss and learn from a variety of action research approaches that include both western and non-western scientific perspectives that emphasize culturally specific models and (b) to use collaborative action research projects as a support for educational reform as an agency rather than an object of change (McTaggart, 1997). The subsequent goals are as follows:

- To create an international platform for teacher educators to share action research projects.
- To facilitate conversations among teacher educators interested in action research from diverse perspectives.
- To exchange opinions and promote discussion of culturally specific action research methodology.
- To establish a global network of action research teacher educators who focus on this approach for their inquiry.
- To facilitate collaboration among researchers internationally to examine key components of action research that impact teaching and learning based on the inquiry process found in the action research process.
- To collate documentation of action research in teacher education with the purpose of providing practitioners with highly reflective pedagogical processes in a well organized format.

- To have a professional voice on teacher education action research to influence policy makers by working through appropriate networks.

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Outreach and Process for Adding Scholars

Outreach and process for adding action research scholars include the following:

1. Initial participants invite faculty colleagues and undergraduate and graduate students [at both the master's and doctoral level] to participate.
2. Action research presentations at international and national conferences, including information about the organization.
3. Initial participants seek university support for to develop and attend action research seminars and participation in global virtual space meetings that include conferences and web-based communication.
4. Initial participants create institutional platforms for a scholarly space for action research in teacher education meetings.
5. Contributions at national symposia and keynote sessions also serve as a venue for extending membership.

Ongoing Work Plan and Expected Scholarly Outcomes

The following areas of implementation and sustainability continue to be the basis of the work plan:

- (a) development of an international working team model, to include monthly

online meetings with an agenda to include updates on action research projects, both individual and collaborative;

(b) development of network responsibility using a Communities of Practice model (discussed in Expected Outcomes);

(c) network community building with a focus on learning and shared leadership in action research in teacher education;

(d) planning and presentation on a regular basis of teacher education action research projects in scheduled network forums;

(e) development of a method for self-assessment and evaluation;

(f) support of a democratic and dialogic theoretical framework as the foundation for the working model of educating teacher educators to become the change agents on whose leadership their nation's advancement depends (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

Thus, participating action researchers have created a platform for creating numerous opportunities for international collaboration in key research areas of teacher education.

Theoretical Framework

A sociocultural approach is the foundation of the inquiry based on the assumption that learning and motivation are socially and culturally situated and that educational reform activity within emerging democratic nations such as Mongolia must be inclusive, imbedded, and owned by the culture itself (Altbach et al., 2009; Heyneman; Innes, 2007; Tessema, 2007). The project uses a democratic, dialogic framework for the higher education professional development reform model. This framework supports faculty and students

to think critically and become problem-solvers in their own right, thus (a) shifting from outside perspectives to a more culturally sustained interactive model (Gardenfors, 2007) and (b) practicing problem solving, experimentation, and discovery so they can return to classrooms to demonstrate participatory learning and research.

Additionally, the work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) is emphasized whereby the inquiry is considered a democratic process and all stakeholders, including students, faculty, and administrators, are part of a transformational center of reform.

Approach to Inquiry

Data collection and analysis of source data are guided by five purposes within a mixed-methods paradigm (Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010): (a) triangulation; (b) elaboration; (c) initiation (i.e., discovering paradoxes and contradictions that led to reframing of research objectives); (d) development (i.e., using findings of qualitative and quantitative data to support each other); and (e) expansion (i.e., seeking to expand the range of research by using different methods for different inquiry components).

Methodological triangulation is sustained through all stages of (a) dialogue and development of action research projects, (b) application of findings within design and implementation, and (c) activities, including development of a specific action research program of study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data are collected in relation to social interaction and individual functioning within the sociocultural context (McNiff, 2013). Data sources include work group

documentation, action research products, observations, individual interviews, and focus group narrative for exploration of personal meaning.

Mixed-methods analysis incorporates Creswell's (2008) conceptualization of research design as follows.

Data transformation. Quantitative data were converted into narrative data to be analyzed qualitatively (i.e., qualitized).

Data correlation. Quantitative data were correlated with the qualitized data.

Data consolidation. Quantitative and qualitative data were combined to create new data sets.

Data comparison. Data from the qualitative and quantitative data sources were compared within the sets.

Data integration. As the final stage, quantitative and qualitative data were integrated into a coherent whole for coding.

Coding process. The coding process is derived from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with coding based on the research question. Additionally, the researchers use a constant comparative process with (a) questions posed while reviewing raw data, (b) pertinent source citations, and (c) analytical note taking. The resulting coding analysis is framed into formative conclusions and data-saturated themes.

Themes. The results of a preliminary study analysis indicate the following themes of successful implementation and sustainability of the action research process within the higher education community:

- development of an international working team model;
- decentralization of responsibility as a Community of Practice model continues to be developed;

- community building with the focus on faculty learning and shared leadership;
- learner-centered, constructivist action research projects; and
- faculty-developed methodology for self assessment and evaluation.

Preliminary Findings

The collaborative international network has created a dynamic opportunity for further analytically based research, especially concerning marginalized scholarly communities in areas of the world that have limited access to a variety of methodologies that include action research as a tool for both their own scholarship and for classroom pedagogy. The theoretical framework continues to involve the role of ideology, values, and beliefs in the implementation and direction of higher education professional development reform. Internationally, this systemic shift to a participatory focus within reform is contingent upon the concept of an educated citizenry being ready to accept the responsibilities of democratic leadership. Thus, based on the ongoing Work Plan and initial implementation and sustainability, progress for the purposes of the ongoing research study has begun to be achieved.

Projected Conclusions and Implications

The results of this continuing study suggest the development of the following areas for continued sustainability of the process:

- a continuance of the working team model to include regularly scheduled meetings, both face-to-face and online, with an agenda that includes updates on action research projects both individual and collaborative;

- designated online responsibility using a Communities of Practice model;
- based on the Communities of Practice model, a network community building continuance with a focus on learning and shared leadership in action research in teacher education;
- planning and presentation on a regular basis of implemented teacher action research projects in scheduled network forums;
- development of a method for self-assessment and evaluation;
- support of a democratic and dialogic theoretical framework as the foundation for a working model of educating teaching educators to become the change agents on whose leadership their nation's advancement depends (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

This Mongolian higher education action research community has adopted an active, reflective, dialogic model with ongoing motivation to impact (a) the building of a higher education professional development learning community and (b) the facilitation of explicit action research projects that impact the nation's educational reformation with organized outcomes leading to further action.

The case built for establishing a network for comparative and international action research in teacher education is based on the knowledge that conceptual frameworks and instrumentation are imperative to keep abreast of globalization of policy and practice (Cloete, 2006; Dimmock & Walker, 2002). Strategic partnerships among participating international scholars underscore the importance of

cultural awareness and interconnectedness in terms of action research, collaboration, cooperation, and critical thinking skills within action research in teacher education.

Based on ongoing planning and suggestions that have emerged, scholarly products will continue to include but are not be limited to:

- an organizational flowchart of the international working team model to include monthly online meetings with agendas that include planning, implementation, and documentation of updates on action research projects, both individual and collaborative. This flowchart is considered to be helpful for documentation, archiving of information, and review of systemic changes.
- a systematized documentation representing the network responsibility using a Communities of Practice model that includes the three principles of social presence, motivation, and collaboration discussed previously.
- network community building based on the Community Practice model with a focus on learning and shared leadership in action research in teacher education;
- planning and presentation with publishable papers on a regular basis of implemented teacher education action research projects in scheduled network forums;
- development of a distinct methodological process for self-assessment and evaluation including the use of rubrics;
- written articulation of a democratic and dialogic theoretical framework as the foundation for the working

model of educating teacher educators to become the change agents on whose leadership their nation's advancement depends (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012).

Successes

National reform programs are not uniform in terms of the success of implementation (DeYoung, 2002; Gardenfors, 2007; Heyneman, 1995). Analysis guided by the formation of coded categories served as a basis for forming preliminary conclusions that include the following:

1. Understanding national educational reform is important as a beginning perspective.
2. Emphasis on learner-centered content informs the building of the community.
3. Building the community involves an ongoing reflective process by the entire learning community.
4. Exploration of the paradigm shift from teacher- to learner-centered instruction is an important reform topic.

Challenges

Results to date of this continued study have made it clear that issues related to reform are not simple. International development and support is important, but it cannot take the place of previous experience for building new academic understanding as well as the predispositions of involved individuals. Our study shows that tolerance for uncertainty is significant and central for developing the scholarly community.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

This collaborative study has created a dynamic opportunity for analytically based research on previous marginalized

scholarly communities that have limited access to the study of a variety of methodologies, both for their own scholarship and for classroom pedagogy. The kind of analysis undertaken in this project supports significant and specific foci for educational reform work led by scholarly communities using learner-centered pedagogy.

The study's perspective addressed the social context of Mongolia's educational reform movement. The theoretical framework involved the role of ideology, values, and beliefs in the implementation and direction of higher education reform. Why is this important? Systemic change within reform is contingent upon preparing an educated citizenry ready to accept the responsibilities of a democratic leadership. Only by educating people to think critically and become problem-solvers in their own right can a nation grow educational leadership internally rather than continuing to depend on NGOs and, thus, be disproportionately influenced by foreign constructs. The findings of this study support a democratic and dialogic theoretical framework on which a workable education reform model can rest—a sustainable model for educating Mongolia's teachers and students to become the change agents on whose leadership their nation's advancement depends.

Additional research is needed to analyze dialogues for their effective use of the higher levels of reflection (Innes, 2007). For those interested in developing a dialogic model for professional development reform, many questions remain, including: Does analysis of such dialogues contain evidence of growth in the level of reflective thinking? What are the direct and indirect connections between the quality of dialogues and the

quality of learning? In general, according to Innes, "additional research is needed that focuses more sharply on understanding how the *transaction* between the sociocultural and cognitive aspects of learning operates in the construction of useful knowledge" (p. 11). Democratic school cultures are those where, in Bruner's words, "being natively good at something implies, among other things, helping others get better at that something" (1996, p. 82). Echoing Bruner's words, it is possible to teach the skills that are needed for democratic educational leadership in the classroom and for reform through the development of a professional learning community such as this.

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