Toward Theological Integration
Using Action Research:
Reflections from an Arab Context

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This article describes our attempt to use an abbreviated version of action research in an integrated learning module of the Theology Program at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut, Lebanon. Practical theological and theological educators can make effective use of this social scientific method within the context of the theological school. Among the benefits of action research are the development of reflective practitioners, the encouragement interactive reflection and learning, and facilitation of contextualization in theological research.

Introduction

As she completes her final year of theological studies, Miriam looks forward to ministry through the church in her minority community1. She sees herself working toward reconciliation between Christians and the majority sociocultural and religious group in her country. The challenges are enormous. How does one overcome deep-seated racism, rooted in centuries of oppression, conflict, and division, in order to restore relationships and reconcile communities divided along lines of socio-religious identity?

For social and religious workers trying to effect change in society, “real-world” problems require integrative, multi-disciplinary approaches. Even deciding how to begin raises complex questions. During the process of researching and planning for social action, the original situation observed may undergo change, along with the researcher herself, so that the initial observations no longer apply. Research for social change is too complex for a linear methodology. Traditional research approaches, I suspect, contribute to the problem of fragmentation among theological disciplines and between “theology” and “practice” in life and ministry.

1 For security reasons, the student’s name has been changed.
In this article, I offer a reflection on my experience using action research as a learning task in an integrative learning module for students at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary (ABTS). In order to help our students to develop research skills that are actually useful for the kinds of problems they will face after graduation, the ABTS curriculum experiments with several non-traditional approaches to research. We have found action research methodology very well-suited to the kinds of theological reflection and community reconciliation work that we hope will characterize our alumni as they serve their contexts through the Church. While this article is not meant to halt the use of traditional research methodologies, I hope it might advance a broader understanding of the use of social scientific research methodology in theological education. For this effort, I am building on the work of many others who have discussed the relationship between practical theology and action research (see Cameron, Bhatti, and Duce 2010; Frazier 2006; Dokecki, Newbrough, and O’Gorman 2001; Graham 2013; Harder 2007; Swinton and Mowat 2006).

What is Action Research?

A number of practical theologians and theological educators recognize the value of action research as a social scientific method for practical theology. In what follows, rather than describe the theoretical components of action research, I will let a student’s project illustrate the process while including relevant discussions of action research principles.

Miriam came to faith in an Arabic-speaking Lebanese church through a neighborhood outreach program. In recent years, she began leading a small group serving newly displaced refugees who had moved to the town where her church is located. These outsiders differed from the established church community economically, culturally, and religiously. The members of her Arab church community were becoming minorities in their town for the first time they could remember. Through the refugee and development ministry of the church, and some Bible study small groups, a number of the refugees came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. While the church was cautiously glad, many people were uncomfortable with any kind of reconciliation that would involve integrating the two groups of believers. Their differences seemed overwhelming to most and

2 I have written this article from the first person perspective intentionally. Important hidden curriculum issues are at stake even in writing an academic article. Action research understands both researchers and participants to be essential research subjects and not merely objects. Taking a distant or “objective” stance in action research conflicts with its methodology and is misleading. By writing from a first-person perspective, I am acknowledging that I am a stakeholder, both active and critical, in the ideas described here. I am neither an absent nor impartial bystander.

3 Due to security issues in our region and the very personal content of student projects, the following descriptions are an amalgamation that represents various issues faced by my students.
integration was opposed by a vocal contingent. Miriam decided that she wanted to research how to reconcile these two groups.

Rather than starting with a theoretical study of reconciliation, Miriam began with observation and informal interviews. Through the interview process, she identified people who seemed willing to work toward resolving the growing tension between the two groups. At the same time, she was also taking classes focusing on the understanding of the Church as a restored and restoring community. This understanding was explored as part of an integrative module taught by a team of faculty that considered biblical-theological, historical-theological, socio-cultural, and ministerial perspectives. Through these multidisciplinary lenses, Miriam analyzed the situation and began to develop an action plan that included a task that would be doable within a short time frame: holding a focus group meeting with interested members from both groups.

Action research can be defined as “a flexible research methodology uniquely suited to researching and supporting change. It integrates social research with exploratory action to promote development” (Given and Somekh 2008, 4). Action research developed as a unique approach particularly suited to situations in which the researcher is both an observer and a stakeholder in the outcome. It is especially concerned with social action intended to develop or repair intergroup relationships (Lewin 1946, 136). While various approaches exist within the field of action research, they share an emphasis on the formative role of both researchers and participants, who in traditional approaches are often merely “objects” of research. In action research, the researcher participates with the researched to set the research question (Harder 2007, 136).

Over Christmas break, Miriam had an opportunity to hold two focus group sessions, out of which emerged some very interesting themes. Through her prodding questions, the focus groups began to identify distinct themes in the various perspectives, questions, and concerns of both groups: How will integrating with “them” change us? Does reconciliation require integration? What if the refugee community returns “home” only to have their new cultural-religious identity be rejected by the dominant majority there? Good questions were being generated beyond the ones she had in mind at first.

Action research methodology recognizes that when observing and researching a person or a group of people, the specific situation being observed will change through the research process itself. In addition, action research acknowledges that the researcher both conceptualizes and participates in the process of social action. Finally, rather than attempting to develop a control by which to compare results, action research values the particularity of the insights emerging from subjective communities (Todhunter 2001).
After the initial focus group meeting, Miriam wrote an evaluation reflecting on both the content generated by the participants and their interactions with one another. Out of this evaluation, she discerned several new issues for further study involving ecclesiology, identity formation, and missiology. These were not where her study on reconciliation had begun, but they have now been revealed through the action research process. Even the situation itself was changing as participants from the initial focus group connected and continued the discussion outside of her official meetings. New plans for potential actions began to emerge in light of all these changes.

By design, action research brings multidisciplinary perspectives to bear on a specific social issue. Rather than ending with a set of propositions for what “ought to be,” the action research project develops as a spiral of observation, reflection, planning and taking action, and evaluation leading to new observations as the cycle repeats. New questions develop out of the direct input of participants in the study. Thus, action research empowers individual participants and communities as co-researchers, who are not merely objects of study (Todhunter 2001). In the Middle East and North Africa, where many of our graduates serve, this kind of community engagement and empowerment is greatly needed.

Our Experience: The Theory and Its Curricular Implications at ABTS

The description I provided above of my student’s project developed from a learning task for one of our integrative learning modules at ABTS. Our curriculum is driven by the seminary’s vision to see God glorified, people reconciled, and communities restored through the Church in the Arab world4. This vision is based on a holistic understanding of salvation that sees a restored humanity, reconciled to God and to each other, called to be restored community that participates with God in a ministry of reconciliation not only with “each other,” but also with “the other.”

In light of our vision, the purpose of our seven-week integrative learning module is to equip our students to empower and nurture churches as communities of reconciliation and effective agents of God’s peace in the world. Through biblical-theological, historical-theological, socio-cultural, and practical-ministerial lenses, students explore the saving work of God that enables a community of peace and the reconciling work of God through this community in the world. The final project for this module is integrative. Analyses from all four theological disciplines are to be integrated by students – this integration is one of the primary criteria by which professors assess students.

Action research is especially conducive to such integration. Although seven weeks is a short time for an action research project, the objective is for students to learn the method of action research and gain some experience through an abbreviated process consisting of two research cycles. Through this abbreviated process, students gain practice that can prepare them for using action research in life and ministry.

The project itself begins on the first day of the integrative module, when students begin conceptualizing the first round of their research. All of our students have previous ministry experience in the Middle East and North Africa, and all of our students are human. Thus, there is no shortage of problems and situations of brokenness for them to consider researching. At this early stage, our students often need a lot of guidance and coaching to find a focus and develop a research plan.

After submitting a report of one cycle of observation, reflection, and action planning, students will attempt to implement one step in their initial action plan. After completing this first step, they will write a brief report describing the action taken, evaluating the effect (or non-effect), and documenting any new or unanswered questions that may have arisen during the process. As they engage in this field work, students continue learning through the multiple theological lenses introduced in the module. Therefore, their understanding of the issues at stake will develop both in and out of the classroom. Students often find that their initial understanding of the problem has changed drastically through both the coursework and fieldwork.

For the final portion of their project, students will submit a portfolio containing the observations, actions reports, and evaluations from their two action research cycles. This portfolio is assessed according to the learning that takes place between the first round and the second, with specific focus on theological integration. The module professors collaborate to set the assessment criteria, assuring that each theological discipline is fairly represented.

Because the entire project is completed over a relatively short period of time, we recognize that it is not a full-scale action research project. Nevertheless, the project does offer our students an introduction to the action research method. Many students have commented that it took them a couple weeks to understand the process. By the end, however, it made more sense to them than traditional research papers assigned in other courses. By going through a second round of reflection and research that challenged what they had originally believed to be the “perfect” action plan, the students gained valuable insights into the complex nature of planning meaningful social action.
Why Use Action Research in Theological Studies?

There are a number of reasons for using action research for integrative and socially engaged theology. As we considered alternative research methods, several advantages of action research stood out in light of our educational outcomes at ABTS.

First, action research develops reflective practitioners (Sagor 2000; Zwodiak Myers 2009). This is the kind of researcher that we are trying to cultivate at ABTS. Swinton and Mowat explain that action research promotes “movement from practice [action] to theory, to critical reflection on practice, to revised forms of practice developed in light of this spiraling process” (2006, loc. 4679). This movement is fundamental to reflective practice, where theory and practice are develop together and inform one another (see Schön 1983; Moon 1999). Action research trains reflective practitioners by promoting reflection on practices and making explicit the tacit knowledge of practitioners (Given and Somekh 2008, 6).

Second, action research encourages integrative reflection and learning. The ABTS curriculum is designed to promote integration among the traditional theological disciplines⁵. To this day, theological education often segregates the disciplines. Despite numerous critiques of this fragmentation, theological curricula continue to support such fragmentation through learning tasks that isolate the traditional theological disciplines from actual practice. Integration of biblical studies, historical theology, contextual realities, and pastoral practice can happen when students are encouraged to address specific church or community issues from multiple perspectives. Because our mission is to prepare students for ministering to the Arab world through churches, we value educational approaches that encourage multidisciplinary research and theory-practice integration.

Finally, action research facilitates contextualization of theological research. The 1990 ICETE Manifesto insists that theological education address the needs of its specific context⁶. The method of action research requires researchers to engage with specific contexts as participants, and not merely as absent observers. It challenges theological students to listen to the questions that arise from their contexts, and to develop and revise their research according to those questions, instead of relying solely on biblical, historical, or theoretical perspectives. It is through this kind of contextualization that theological education can have real significance in given contexts.

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⁵ For a more detailed description of ABTS’s curricular design, see Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education* (Carlisle: Langham, 2014), 4.

Some Challenges

Despite the overall success of our experience in guiding projects that involve action research, I have two critical concerns that present challenges to using action research in theological education in general and in the Arab world in particular.

In critiquing social scientific models of action research, Swinton and Mowat point out that “the focus of action tends to be on generating solutions to particular problems” (2006, loc. 4687). Problem-solving is the fundamental telos of action research. While practical theology does share with social science a commitment to context, its fundamental purpose is not merely pragmatic. Rather, its telos lies in enabling the people of God “to remain faithful to God and to participate fully in God’s continuing mission to the world” Swinton and Mowat 2006, loc 4711). Its mission is to glorify God and not just to fix problems. It is important to keep this difference in mind when introducing theology students to action research. Particularly in the regions and contexts where my students live and serve, it is quite common to feel hopeless and doubtful about true change. The “promise” of a new methodology can lead to disappointment if change is slow or non-existent. By keeping the telos of theological action research in mind, we remember that the ultimate assessment criterion is faithfulness to God’s mission in the world.

My second critique is of particular concern in Islamic contexts, but may have more general implications. Action research emerged in the context of broader developments in educational theory, including Paulo Friere’s liberation pedagogy and Donald Schön’s reflective practice (Given and Somekh 2008, 6). These developments have in common a grounding in the values and knowledge of the participant community. That is, they test and adapt theory based on the practices of the participant community, rather than prioritizing theory developed “from above” by the academy. This attention to practice conflicts with the epistemological assumptions of dominant approaches to Islamic education7. These approaches hold significant influence in Arab cultural contexts. This conflict has driven an ongoing debate in professional education in the Arab world about the viability of reflective practice in Arab culture8. While this debate exposes

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certain imprecise constructs of “Arab culture,” it does also illustrate some of the socio-religious obstacles to implementing action research. Whether new critical-contextual approaches to action research are needed in Arab contexts may be an issue for further exploration.

Conclusion

In this article, I reflected on an experience of implementing an abbreviated version of the action research method in an Arab theological educational program. In our limited experience with training students in the theory and practice of action research, we have identified many advantages. Action research is the kind of tool that can help a Middle Eastern woman like Miriam to conceptualize how theology can make a difference in her community. Action research can help her to plan and experiment with actions designed to promote change in her community toward reconciliation between Christian minorities and dominant groups. In settings like the Middle East and North Africa, action research can be a powerful tool for promoting the kind of theological integration that leads to social change.

References


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