

Action Research: A Model for Teacher Leadership through the NCATE Review Process

By Alison Black and Anna Stave



In a time of demand for higher standards and higher accountability for teacher preparation, we are all engaged in some form of program evaluation. Although we are familiar with and most frequently use institutional, state, and national standards to assess our programs, we most probably overlook the personal dynamics of change that accompany program assessment and renewal.

bell hooks describes these more personal aspects central to the process of productive change:

Alison Black is an assistant professor and Anna Stave is an associate professor at the State University of New York at Oneonta (SUNY-Oneonta).

We cannot be easily discouraged. We cannot despair when there is conflict. Our solidarity must be affirmed by shared belief in a spirit of intellectual openness that celebrates diversity, welcomes dissent, and rejoices in collective dedication to truth. (1994, p. 33)

This quotation would have served us well during our preparation for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Because New York's State Education Department has mandated that all SUNY schools be accredited by a national accrediting agency, our institution selected NCATE. At this time, no other accrediting agencies have yet been approved by the U.S. Department of Education.

During this preparation, several departments—elementary education and reading, secondary education, and educational psychology—struggled to unite as a division, and five key concepts emerged: collaboration, community, flexibility, resilience, and administrative support and involvement. Reaffirming hooks's call to come together, these five concepts would guide us over the next three years during our attempts to look at where we were and move to where we needed to be.

The NCATE approach to program evaluation follows the broader concept of action research, a process of fact finding, taking action, and evaluating the results (Lewin, 1948). These actions are a process in which colleagues in a school setting use disciplined inquiry to study their actions and the results of their actions in order to improve their decisions, their instruction, the results of their instruction, and their program and institutional organization (Calhoun, 1994; Corey, 1953; Glickman, 1993; Lippit, 1985).

Action research, defined as the "disciplined inquiry in context of focused efforts to improve the quality of the organization and its performance"

(Calhoun, 1994, p. 2), became our model. Its cycle, as shown in Figure 1, became our guide. The overall “area selected” identified the problem: changing K–12 school populations with their changing needs and demands as well as changing standards had to be reflected in our teacher-preparation program. More specifically, for this discussion the “area selected” is the graduate reading program, and its focus is predetermined by the NCATE review, which has adopted the International Reading Association (IRA) standards for such a program.

Within the IRA standards, the “area selected” for discussion below is competency 1.3: “Has knowledge of current and historical perspectives about the nature and purposes of reading and about widely used approaches to reading instruction” (IRA, 1992, p. 33). Collecting data (step 2) involved gathering course syllabi, which included specific course objectives, content covered, and methods of instruction and assessment as well as

ing the course syllabi; and assessing the effectiveness of course experiences for both instructors and education students. This information returns us to the first step, where an area of concern regarding competency 1.3 for a specific course or courses becomes the new “area selected.”

NCATE became an opportunity for us to become educational leaders and action researchers entering the new century. It provided an organizational structure, demanded a research base, supported a national perspective, and offered us assistance. The assistance included written materials, workshops, visits to our program, and direct communication with individuals in specific professional organizations who review content folios. The essential elements of action research—individual and collective self-renewal with an acceptance of discomfort and delight in change (Calhoun, 1994)—began to appear as we worked within and across departments through the NCATE process.

Example 1		
IRA MATRIX FOR ADVANCED READING EDUCATION PROGRAM		
Philosophy of Reading Instruction Competencies of candidates	Course numbers, course titles and experiences that meet the guidelines	Competency level
1.0 Reading is a complex, interactive, and constructive process		
1.3 Has knowledge of current and historical perspectives about the nature and purposes of reading and about widely used approaches to reading instruction.	<u>EDUC 623: Foundations of Dev. Reading (Obj. 2)</u> Assignment 2: Group Presentations Assignment 5: Portfolio Assignment 7: Content Knowledge Test <u>EDUC 584: Lang. Acquisition & Emergent Literacy (Obj. 2)</u> Assignment 3: Inquiry Paper <u>EDUC 546: Literacy Across the Curriculum (Obj. 6)</u> Assignment 5: Inquiry Paper <u>EDUC 655: Seminar in Graduate Study: Project Proposal (Obj. A)</u> Assignment 1: Project Proposal	I

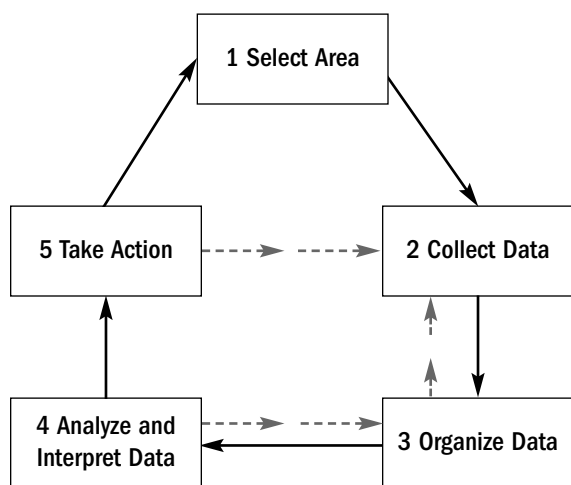
integrated field or clinical experiences. Step 3, the organization of data, was accomplished by completing the IRA matrix (see Example 1). Folio writers, department chairs, and course instructors worked together to analyze and interpret data (step 4) by looking at how well the course experiences and materials matched the specific IRA competency (1.3). Step 5 involved taking three actions: clarifying and revising course experiences for both instructors and education students; teach-

Change became a constant, and the central concept of change—“education on the edge of possibility” (Caine and Caine, 1997)—became a reality. Caine and Caine discuss four features that exemplify this: 1) a state of constant exploration and opportunity; 2) a gain of flexibility and resilience; 3) emergence of a powerful and authentic community; and 4) self-inquiry around a set of beliefs. Each of these features became more apparent as we individually and collectively made

our way through the action research cycle (Figure 1). However, each action and reaction was tempered with its relationship to our conceptual framework.

Figure 1

THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE



The Conceptual Framework

In addition to looking at courses and content-area standards, the NCATE process involved looking at the newly formed division’s conceptual framework and organizational structure. In this paper, this discussion will center on the development of the conceptual framework.

The conceptual framework . . . served as the newly formed division of education’s philosophical or mission statement, making clear who we are, what we believe, and what we want for our education students.

The conceptual framework is one of the fundamental pieces NCATE required. As a design of professional education, it served as the newly formed division of education’s philosophical or mission statement, making clear who we are, what we believe, and what we want for our education students. NCATE required that the conceptual framework be knowledge and research based, articulated, shared, coherent, consistent with the institution’s mission, and continuously evaluated. Eventually we were able to condense our conceptual framework into four central themes with a series of indicators.

Theme 1, “Academic and Professional Excellence,” is evident in its indicators: “have a

strong background in the liberal arts, are effective communicators and critical thinkers, hold high expectations for themselves and others, demonstrate mastery of teaching and learning techniques, and are active in appropriate professional organizations.” “Respect for Diversity” is theme 2, with the following indicators: “show respect for self and others, have knowledge of diversity, have experience with diverse cultures, apply their knowledge of diversity to enhance learning, and see parents and families as partners in student growth.” The indicators of the third theme, “Empowerment,” include “possess characteristics of self awareness, caring, and confidence; create an environment of shared responsibility; value service learning experiences; develop a community of learners; and serve as leaders and change agents in the school and community.” Theme 4 is “Best Teaching Practices.” Its indicators are “use research-based, constructivist approaches; effectively plan, implement, and assess learning; apply knowledge of state and national standards; effectively integrate technology; and are reflective, self-directed, lifelong learners.”

Initially the first draft of the conceptual framework was reviewed by area school personnel (K–12 teachers and administrators), college faculty (education and liberal arts), college education students, and college administrators. A smaller committee was given the task of collecting, assessing, and revising the conceptual framework. This was a long process, which involved fourteen drafts, each reviewed by the above stakeholders. Work began in spring 1997, the first draft was completed in summer 1997, and the final document was approved by the provost March 5, 1998. As the conceptual framework was developed, content area folios were also being developed (see Action Research Cycle, Figure 1).

Content Area Folios

Each program in the division of education was required to submit a content-area folio. Therefore, we submitted folios for the elementary education program, each of the content areas in our secondary education program (including English, mathematics, science, and social studies), and our graduate programs in counseling and in reading. Specific examples shared in this discussion will be from the graduate reading folio.

Institutions seeking NCATE accreditation are required to respond to the guidelines set forth by the specific discipline’s professional organization; for example, ACEI (Association for Childhood

Education International) for elementary education, NCTE (National Council of Teachers of English) for English education, NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) for mathematics education, NSTA (National Science Teachers Association) for science education, and NCSS (National Council for Social Studies) for social sciences education. Institutions seeking NCATE accreditation for graduate reading programs are required to respond to the curriculum sections of the International Reading Association's (IRA) guidelines for the preparation of reading teachers and specialists, *Standards for Reading Professionals*.

The bulk of each folio lies in the matrix of competencies and course descriptions, which include all syllabi for the program. The matrix of competencies is provided by each professional organization and lists the required competencies and proficiency levels. Each competency in the matrix must be addressed by at least one course required for all students in the program. This ensures that everyone taking a specific course will have the same experiences, which will provide each student with that specific competency. Experiences (i.e., assignments) which address that competency should be noted for each course, and clear connections are vital. For example, Example 1 (p. 131), taken from the IRA Matrix from the 1992 standard, focuses on IRA competency 1.3 and delineates what course experiences help to meet that competency.

The course descriptions focus on the syllabi. NCATE requires that a specific syllabus form be followed. The second example below is taken from the syllabus from EDUC 623: Foundations of Developmental Reading, a required introductory course in the graduate reading program. Note that EDUC 623 is listed in Example 1 and relates to objective 2 (Example 2). Also note that a course objective as seen below in Example 2 or specific course experience (as noted in Example 1) may illustrate more than one competency. The course objectives and outcomes in Example 1 mirror the language of the IRA standards, and the specific competencies embedded in each objective are indicated.

Due to our large student population, seldom does one instructor "own" a course. It is more likely that several will teach the same course. Combining this fact with the need for each course to reflect the conceptual framework, to address the specific professional organization's standards, and to fit the NCATE-approved syllabus,

Example 2

1.0 Course Objectives and Outcomes

This course is designed to enable students to:

2. Demonstrate knowledge of the role of models of thought in the reading process as well as major theories of language development through study and experiences that link child development and literacy development to school curriculum designed to meet the needs of all readers and enable them to succeed.

(IRA 1.3, 4.88, 85.2, 6.5, 8.7)

the work goes beyond the individual and becomes a collaborative process for the specific course as well as for the curriculum area. All of us responsible in developing our specific folios began to live in the zone of proximal development, that "distance between an actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through . . . collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 379). For example, EDUC 623: Foundations of Developmental Reading is a course that can be taught by different instructors. In developing the syllabus to meet the standards, reading faculty examined objectives, activities, and existing public school curriculum in light of individual research and philosophical viewpoints. This examination enabled us to develop a common vision for the course.

By coming together as individuals, just as separate departments had come together to work as a division of education, we were able to use our accumulated expertise to address the challenges of change reflected in how we teach, what we teach, and the results of our teaching. Just as Vygotsky believed that "development can be understood only by looking directly at the process of change" (p. 381), our constant self-reflection and examination of basic assumptions enabled us to understand, accept, and implement the changes needed within and between our courses, our departments, our division, and our institution. For example, some faculty assumed that extensive written reviews of professional literature were vital to all introductory graduate courses. However, discussion within the division enabled us to see that an extensive review was necessary within the program but not within each course.

The action research cycle continued. Once the conceptual framework and content-area folios were in place with clear connections between the two, a review process of considering what was working and how well it was working was necessary. This monitoring system continues a focus on courses, interactions, assessments, curriculum, students' progress, and our system of decision making.

A curriculum committee and assessment committee were created within the division to monitor all programs. In monitoring the graduate programs, the curriculum committee examined the need for a reading focus. It determined that the existing structure (EDUC 623 for elementary education and reading and EDUC 546: Content Area Literacy for secondary) matched the standards for our new program.

By reviewing all graduate programs within the division, faculty gained a clearer picture of program components as well as peer expertise and interests, and were consequently better able to determine where particular objectives, activities, and experiences were best situated to promote student growth and development.

Thus, the key concepts that allowed us to survive this process—collaboration, community, flexibility, resilience, and administrative support and involvement—are a continued part of our personal and program development.

So why should any teacher-preparation program submit to such a grueling and time-consuming process, unless mandated to do so? If we are to continue as leaders in education, we need to address the challenges of our nation's changing demographics and rising standards. Too often we may be reluctant to change because of time, resource, and staffing constraints. However, NCATE provided us with a strong rationale of the

necessary resources for program assessment, change, and improvement. It made us visible on campus and opened a window for other members of the campus and community to see what teacher educators do. It created a dialogue across campus and renewed coordination with arts and science faculty. Our "collective dedication" as a division has been recognized by the administration, and our collaborative efforts have resulted in a greater appreciation of each other's skills, a greater awareness of available resources, and a renewed confidence in our own abilities, as individuals and as a division. This initiative enables us to continue our mission and the challenge of preparing future educational professionals dedicated to academic and professional excellence, respect for diversity, best teaching practices, and empowering their students and themselves.

Editor's note: SUNY-Oneonta was certified by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in October 2000.

References

- Caine, R.N. and Caine, G. (1997). *Education on the edge of possibility*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.
- Calhoun, E. (1994). *How to use action research in the self-renewing school*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.
- Corey, S.M. (1953). *Action research to improve school practices*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Glickman, C. D. (1993). *Renewing America's schools: A guide for school based action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- International Reading Association. (1992). *Standards for reading professionals*. Newark, Del.: IRA.
- Lewin, K. (1948). *Resolving social conflicts: Selected papers on group dynamics*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lippitt, G.L., Langseth, P., and Mossop, J. (1985). *Implementing organizational change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.