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Action Research as a Space for Transforming Learning Cultures

ABSTRACT: The article presents a three-year educational action research project on autonomous and reflective learning. Students and teachers, being actively engaged in many learning practices, were both participating in process(es) of developing educational and research community. These interrelated processes framed a dynamic space for constructing and reconstructing the participants' learning cultures. Thanks to linking educational and research aspects of students' activity and to interpenetration of practice and reflection, action research generates particular conditions for learning cultures' transformation, from "traditional" toward "new" ones, based on reflectivity, authenticity and empowerment. The dynamism of learning cultures was connected to various and conscious and reflective types of educational participation, which affected autonomy of studying (in its numerous dimensions and types), being in turn a constitutive element of participants' learning cultures.

KEYWORDS: action research, learning culture, educational participation, autonomy.

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ACTION RESEARCH: EDUCATIONAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

According to Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury (2008), action research is “a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing” (p. 1). They are practices of “participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or less extent as inquiring co-researchers” (p. 1). These practices cannot, then, be perceived only as a “research methodology” (Fals Borda, 2005), for they more and more become “philosophy of life” (Fals Borda, 2005), causing the participants’ transformation into cooperating, (in the name of democratic values) reflective subjects. Treating this philosophy as a base for cooperation between academic teachers and students can move them closer to “the problems of real life” (Fals Borda, 2005) and restore “universities’ critical mission” (Fals Borda, 2005; Greenwood, Levin, 2000). Such understanding of action research runs thanks to a specific research process enabling the learning community to undertake and monitor activities that serve problem-solving and lead to new competences.

Many action researchers and advocates of this research strategy underline difficulties in generating a simple and unambiguous definition for it. Some define it as

a form of collective self-reflective inquiry 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, MacTaggart, as cited in Kemmis, 2008, p. 122)

Others perceive action research as a small-scale intervention in the individuals’ real world in which consequences are fairly investigated (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 1996). For yet others, action research is a democratic, emancipatory process, based on rightful social relations (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) and leading to the detection of personal potential (Stringer, 2008). It is also a process of generating and co-generating knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2000) acquired through personal and communal experience (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), researched and analyzed reflectively (Feldman, 2001). The process of knowledge generation allows the partici-

pants to make positive changes in their lives, in many spheres of “living” experiences. Reason and Bradbury (2008) state:

a primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge and to contribute through it to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (p. 2)

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (2011) underline the fact that action research is “a form of professional learning” that “has been particularly well developed in education but it is now used widely across the professions” (p. 7). “The practitioners are getting together to investigate their collective work and put their stories of learning into the public domain” (p. 8). The learning and research process tends to be cyclical (“observe-reflect-act-evaluate-modify-move in new directions”) and is often referred to as the “action-reflection cycle” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). Thanks to such interrelations of learning and research processes, a learning community arises. Their participants create their personal activity theories, taking advantage of their own and other members’ experiences, which are commonly investigated and—through the common debate—analyzed. The epistemological lenses for understanding and interpreting the “depth” of such learning processes and practices can be the category of learning culture, which means “social practices through which people learn” (Hodkinson, Biesta, & James, 2007, p. 419) using their dispositions, modes of activities and biographies (Biesta & James, see Nizińska, 2010, p. 328). Culture of learning is constituted through the individuals’ engagement in many activities of their everyday lives, not only in formal education, but “through engagement within the world” (Nizińska, p. 328), which is understood as a multidimensional cultural learning environment. It includes both “the larger context *the world* and the local context of practice,” which interplay and become an arena of two irreducible ways of knowing (Peim & Hodkinson, 2007, p. 389).

Applying learning culture to education demands taking into consideration cultural context in a wider sense (culture outside) and local, specific learning context (culture within), which can also be an expression of the “culture at large” (Peim & Hodkinson, 2007). Learning culture manifested in individuals’ learning practices is then socially and culturally mediated through their embodiment in many contexts. The way the learners constitute their “world of practice” is at the same time an expression of both individual and cultural (epistemic, social, institutional, organizational) aspects of learning cultures. Their complex character is in some way connected with a complexity of learning contexts (Peim & Hodkinson, 2007), which is increased by dynamics of culture. Being a product of human engagement, it is “subject to a gradual change” (Ferraro, 2002, p. 25). Participating in a continuing process of learning, people are “mutually constitutive parts of any learning culture” (Hodkinson et al., p. 425). This way they rather create culture than just respond to it (Thomas &

Brown, 2011), actively searching for opportunities to realize their own practical priorities and desires. These dynamic processes are supported by learning culture typical of certain learning environments (Hodkinson et al., 2007) created through social processes close to the learning context. Here the circulation of knowledge plays an important role: some “assumptions in various learning situations inform learners’ practice which in turn contributes to the maintenance of particular learning cultures” (Peim & Hodkinson, 2007, p. 397). Interdependent character and mutual mediation of many factors cause possibilities of creating complex and dynamic individual and communal learning cultures. There is, then, no universally applicable type of learning culture irrespective of people’s circumstances or the organizational or institutional settings they find themselves in (Fryer, 1999). Learning cultures are also tied with epistemic communities whose process of shaping is mediated both with processes of epistemisation (knowledge dynamics) and socio-cultural and political processes determining learning processes in higher education. In addition, the transitional character of learning (Scott, 2014) and the fact that learners often move between learning cultures, changing their positions and dispositions that concern learning, allows us to understand learning as a “process of continual becoming through participation in several different learning cultures over time” (Hodkinson et al., 2007, p. 425).

The dynamic and historically changing nature of learning cultures leads to considering action research within a socio-cultural perspective which is based on socio-cultural psychology (Engeström & Sannino, 2012; Gołębiak, 2007, 2014; Gołębiak & Zamorska, 2014; Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2010; Vygotski, 2002; Zamorska, 2013). It perceives people’s activity in the context of social and cultural environment, changing dynamically in a historical process. Acting individuals can reconstruct the situation they experience using psychological tools they learned in their own living trajectories as members of a certain culture. These resources encompass practices, instruments, motives and values through which culture is constituted. So, according to Vygotsky’s ideas, each activity has its own history and is connected to people’s past experiences, with past tools and practices successfully used to solve any problems encountered. Current performance is perceived in a perspective of former practices (past-to-present perspective) (Wells, 1999). But learning new practices, new modes of knowing and acting, demands a qualitative change of the learner’s activity; he/she faces the necessity of searching for other ways of action, to create new knowledge and undertake new learning practices. It is often a difficult transition experienced by students meeting intellectual collisions, educational problems that may be solved only by leaving former activity modes and—together with more experienced learners—working on new ones (Veresov, 2009). Participating in such educational experiences disposed students to change their former culture of learning—to practice independent and autonomous learning, based on creative and reflective engagement, to overcome educational difficulties by cooperating with others in the learning community. The core meaning have here episodes of mutual engagement, motivating students to common activity to solve problems (Filipiak, 2008; Schaffer, 1993; Wertsch, 1994; Zamorska, 2013). Finding this solution often means overcoming the borders

of group stability and creating new modes of practices (Gołębnik, 2013; Zamorska, 2013). This is the way new learning cultures are constituted, based on changing the modes of acting, undertaking new practices; students become agents of change, solving problems that emerge during actions.

TOWARD AUTONOMOUS LEARNING CULTURES: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The action research project was undertaken (from 2002 to 2006) at Teachers College in Szczytno (Wołodźko, 2013) in northeast Poland, in the Warmia and Mazury region, which was characterized by rather weak economy, high unemployment and rather little chance for young people to find jobs. These characteristics were one of the most important reasons for choosing the research field. Giving such students opportunities to become autonomous persons was, in my understanding, a chance for them to overcome the barriers they experienced in their personal and professional development, to become active members of a small city's society.

Becoming an autonomous person is a process that takes a rather long time and demands people's engagement in practices that encourage autonomous activity. In other words, one cannot be autonomous without practicing autonomy, sometimes making a big effort to overcome internal and external barriers to achieving independence and freedom, but also responsibility for individually decided values, motives and actions (Benson, 2001; Haworth, 1986; Obuchowski, 2000). Autonomy is, then, a phenomenon that needs processable and time-consuming strategy of research, as well as needing a space for autonomous activity developed through many tasks, roles and contributions. Such space is constituted in the process of action research, whose essence is to introduce changes to the situation recognized by participants as not suitable, as a barrier to their developmental expectation and desires. All participants (the researcher and members of the research group) work together to improve the situation and further make the research "respond to people's desire to act creatively" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 8) and develop a consciousness with the potential to transform the experience "in conversation with both self and others that allows us consistently to create useful actions that leave us and our co-inquirers stronger" (p. 8). The participatory character of action research also means inclusion of all stakeholders in each stages of the research process: recognizing the input situation (diagnosis), planning the activity, undertaking it and evaluating the received results of introduced change (output situation) (Reason & Torbert, 2010). This active and common participation underlines a specific culture of action research; people working together become agents engaged in "mutual sensemaking and collective action" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4), being involved "both in questioning and sensemaking that informs the research and in the action which is its focus" (p. 4). Practice is, then, the most important tool in the research and learning processes. Practical nature also has knowledge gathered through the combination of action and reflection, theory and practice, developed "in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues

of pressing concern to people” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4). Such active engagement in commonly undertaken tasks helps “the individual practitioner develop skills of reflective practice and community members develop a culture of open inquiry” (Reason, 2001, p. 183) develop “communities of inquiry” (p. 3).

I considered all these elements of the nature of action research while preparing and undertaking the research project. In addition, to reflect the dynamic and qualitative character of the research strategy and autonomy as a processable phenomenon, I introduced a category of borderland (paradigmatic, epistemological and methodological) into my thinking about the realization of the project. Searching for best paradigmatic “rooting,” I was inclining to the participative and collaborative paradigm treated by Heron and Reason (see Lincoln & Guba, 2000) (next to positivist, post-positivist, critical and constructivist) as a fifth paradigm, based on perceiving social reality as a participative, subjectivist and objectivist phenomenon, recognized and changed by critical subjectivity, acting consciously and self-reflectively. Action research is situated in a participatory paradigm because of its idea of language turn and especially action turn (Reason & Torbert, 2010), appreciating activity as a condition for personal and social transformation of individuals experiencing their daily life in multicontextual reality.

Epistemological borderland was connected to the necessity of the search—not only before but also during the research process—for an adequate approach to action research and to decide about a synergy of approaches, including humanistic, existential, emancipatory and socio-cultural ones (Wołodźko, 2013, pp. 79–97). Such a complex approach was a response to researching autonomy in its many dimensions, its types and the ways it was achieved. It was also connected with a dynamics of research process and a process of emergence the categories discovered in certain stages of the research and data interpretation; they appeared during the process of building research bricolage of continually gathered data. Their interpretation also required readiness to search for new readings, progressive penetration of the literature. The methodological openness meant the research process was spiral in nature and a big contribution of reflection treated as a tool for change made in the research procedure (e.g. planning new activities, posing new research questions, complementing new research techniques, their crystallization). It was “making road while walking” (Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, 2008, p. 24). This dynamism was supported by the reflection “working” in the action research project, which was not only “classical” (in-action, on-action) (Schön, 1983) but also autobiographical, cooperative, communal (Feldman, 2001), cognitive, metacognitive (Benson, 2001), critical (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006) and existential (Feldman, 2002). All these types of reflection “conjectured” by the participants constituted their conscious activity in the educational and research process, their understanding of the foregoing and reconstructed meanings of autonomy and its dimensions, and their type of educational participation, which was a base of the (re)built culture of learning.

The aims of the project were—typically for action research (Reason, 2001)—two-fold. I was trying to focus on both a process of generating knowledge and a process of

empowering the students to think and act autonomously, to undertake autonomous and reflective participation in the educational and research process. So the first objective concerned educational aspects of the project. I started with a process of constitution autonomy-supportive environment (Reeve, 2006), trying to balance control and support given to students undertaking autonomous and reflective tasks. It was to enhance students to make an effort (even take a risk) to change their previous patterns of learning through the engagement in many “autonomy supportive” practices. They were asked to search independently (individually or in small groups) for educational resources (texts, manuals, websites, scientific articles and books) to prepare materials for discussions, debates, projects, dramas, individual and groups presentations, psychological games, poster sessions, simulation games and conceptual maps. These activities enabled them to generate their personal knowledge, in its many types: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical (Park, 2005), and to negotiate it within a group that was a social arena of final construction and reconstruction of the constituted meanings. Students were being offered freedom to make their own decisions considering the shape and scope of their engagement, and the type of their participation. They experienced freedom of their voices, thoughts and activities. The narrative and reflective character of action research processes conducted to their openness and independence, and step by step they became—in a differential way—co-organizers and co-authors of commonly undertaken practices. This principle was also applied during workshops included in educational curriculum. Their aim was to give students the possibility to support their personal development, especially personal features related to autonomy: self-reflection, self-esteem, internal motivation, empowerment, authenticity, independence, courage, openness and readiness for change. Workshops consisted of three modules: integration, self-recognition and autonomous activity. All types of practices offered to students were intentionally oriented by me, both to encourage their personal development and to build community of (educational and research) practice (Wenger, 1998). These communal aspects of the action research project played a very important role in the process of learning autonomously and reflectively (“learning how to learn”). Thanks to “good” communication, cooperation and supportive peer relations, the process of becoming a community developed, and—on the other side—a community working more effectively became a more supportive environment for transforming their learning cultures into an autonomous and reflective one. Students’ increasing openness created suitable conditions for them to share their personal, social and cultural capital.

Educational action research also demands the reconstruction of traditional teachers’ role. Most of the time I organized and facilitated students’ activity, but some students expected to be supported, others disciplined and mobilized, depending on how students took of their new freedom. For some it was a mobilization to work independently and effectively. (I called them “diligent students,” “reflective persons,” “open minds.”) Others (“free birds”) treated autonomy-supportive education as permission to avoid earnest work, while still others (“minimalists,” “doubtful students”)

made a big effort to struggle with the “autonomous” demands they had not accepted or did not yet have, in their opinions, competences to manage.

The second objective concerned research on the way students experienced autonomous and reflective learning, the meanings they gave to their experiences and the process of their learning cultures’ transformation. The procedure embraced application of many research techniques and continued during the research cycles, among them participative observation (active-member researcher; complete-member researcher—Adler, 2000) and many types of interviews (semi-structured, phenomenographic). In addition, many narrative documents (e.g. reflective essays, educational documents, reports, projects, etc.) produced by the students and me as a researcher (diary, memos, notes) were gathered and analyzed. They included documents related to students’ educational activity and to their personal interpretation of the experiences in which they participated (self-reflection, metareflection). To monitor the process of changes in many their areas (personal, communal, educational), the research techniques were used in the beginning of the process (pretest), after each cycle and in the end (post-test). This way a large amount of (mostly narrative) data about running processes was gathered and analyzed. The analysis was both phenomenological and phenomenographical; I was trying to reach an essence of investigated phenomena (autonomy and changing learning cultures), participants’ individual experiences and their conceptualizations. Though I gave up insightful case studies, I analyzed each person’s data individually, comparing students, and also making transverse analysis to define the types of their participation, the way they experienced autonomy and its role in the process of learning cultures’ (re)construction.

ACTION RESEARCH AS A SPACE FOR TRANSFORMING LEARNING CULTURES

The processes running during the action research (first of all, investigative and educational ones) were accompanied by other processes that were intertwined and constituted particular learning environments. Cooperation and interpenetration of these processes (“processual interactions”) (Wołodźko, 2013) created a context in which the participants’ engagement was embedded. So understanding the dynamics of change students experienced in their participation and in other areas demanded perceiving it through the processes occurred in the learning community (Zamorska, 2013). Being a member of the action research community, I could observe these dynamics through analyzing the motivational, social and reflective processes, which in turn found their reflections in the process of students’ participation in learning practices. Motivational processes appeared during an organization of the autonomy-supportive learning environment and intentional teacher-researcher’s activity to enhance students’ ability to learn autonomously. For some students, such a learning environment meant experiencing freedom to act autonomously; others needed to be supported or even controlled by the teacher. No less effort from teachers was necessary to support reflective processes, which are especially important in auto-

mous learning. Loudly telling “what I think,” and sharing personal experiences and opinions “during lessons” was a challenge for many students, mostly because—as they said—they had had no such experiences at school. Reflective processes occurred during reflective dialogs related to many pedagogical issues, based on the literature read or educational theories. Social processes “taking part” in the educational and research processes were connected with the process of reconstructing students’ groups into a learning and inquiry community (Wenger, 1998). Such a community became a social arena for learning by negotiating meanings, by acting, by belonging, by becoming; these learning dimensions formulated by Wenger displayed differential manners of students’ experiences of studying in social setting. Thanks to collaboration, students improved their personal communication, built mutual respect and trust, and built a culture of common activity in the “community of differences” (Kurantowicz, 2010).

The motivational, reflective and social processes and their interrelations were the context for students’ participation, which was transforming during the realization of the project, observed and critically reflected. In action research, participation is a category of basic meaning. The essence of participation is both activity and belonging to the community inside which each member negotiates his/her position, scope of autonomy, possible area of his/her authenticity, freedom and independence. Participation supports the commonly undertaken learning process, which is analyzed both in socio-cultural context and in relation to the community members’ individual differences (psychological, biographical, social, cultural) (Harris & Shelswell, 2005). Participation relates to the process of identity construction, which is dynamized in communities’ negotiating ideas, texts, events, relations and cultural patterns of practice (learning cultures).

Gathering data in the following research cycles, I defined six types of student participation, considering such factors as engagement in the learning practices, motivation, type of reflection, approach to learning (surface, competitive, deep), relations with the group, the evinced difficulties and the ways students experienced autonomy (Wołodźko, 2013). On a base of these factors, I defined the following types of students’ participation: “diligent students,” “open minds,” “free birds,” “reflective persons,” “minimalists” and “doubtful students.” Students presenting different types of educational participation differed from one another significantly, but the first meanings given to acquired experiences of autonomous learning were very similar. They stated that educational practices in which they participated were mostly unknown to them in the freedom they experienced in thinking, talking, acting and so open relating with a teacher. One student said:

It was because this type of lessons we were meeting for the first time, they were atypical and in the beginning we didn’t know how to approach them, from which side to bite them, how to catch them, what was going on there...

Such participation demanded from them the deconstruction of previous patterns of educational activity and making an effort to face new requirements. The students experienced “disorientation dilemma leading to a feeling of disequilibrium” (Gravett, 2004, p. 266). Through critical reflection, dialog and efforts to accomplish the educational tasks, step by step they started to build a new learning culture, based on autonomy of studying, learning consciousness, engagement, readiness for change, freedom—for some students freedom “to” for others freedom “from.” (The resistance to teachers, the group and some tasks also made important contributions to the process of the autonomy of studying and new learning culture’s emergence.) Their learning process, then, had a transformative nature (Mezirow, 1997). Many times they felt inconsistency of their previous thoughts, feeling, actions and approaches to learning and their role as students; they realized their assumptions and presuppositions about learning and their participation in the educational setting were mostly unconscious. Through reflective and constructive debate, they could realize their role in their former learning culture, and—finally—they could revise those preassumptions and start a process of transforming them according to this revision. Another student-girl said:

When I attended secondary school, I learned because I had to pass class tests and then I forgot, so I was learning from one class test to another. That time I didn’t think about learning as a process preparing me for adult life, for things I will do in the future; I didn’t treat it this way. But now it is becoming different. I can see the big difference between my former and current understanding of learning.

Autonomy of studying—being made operational “in the light” of rich data gathered during the entire project—was the constitutive element of the transformed learning cultures. It was connected with a progressive and differential participation in the practices of autonomous learning, in the process of becoming an autonomously learning person. It was a process (not a product), which means its variability and continuity of change occurred thanks to students’ engagement in making their efforts to struggle with new tasks, taking new challenges of overcoming personal and social constraints, and risking failure.

Autonomy is a multidimensional construct (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997). Its dimensions I chose for the investigation—reflectivity, authenticity, responsibility and empowerment—were monitored during the research in both students’ experiences and my own. In addition, I was searching in the inductive procedure for the dimensions of autonomy the students indicated in their experiences and narrations. For them, the most important dimensions of autonomy in studying was freedom to decide the ways of studying: the choice of curriculum, teachers, methods, texts, lessons and opinions. In their understanding of autonomy “in life,” the constitutive dimension was the independence of becoming an adult person, which was not included in the educational connotation of autonomy.

Reflectivity played the biggest role in the process of transforming learning cultures. Making reflective notes, participating in reflective dialogs, writing reflective essays, and analyzing pedagogical texts and the results of their own research (e.g. a monograph they prepared after the second cycle of the research), students could learn how to introduce reflection into the process of learning and pedagogical investigation. Thanks to reflectivity, they discovered the authenticity of their personalities; they could consider their empowerment not only with reflection-on-action and in-action, but also in light of autobiographical, existential and critical one. Reflectivity became a tool of change, and students could reflectively monitor the progress and results of their own activity. They could develop their self-awareness and responsibility, defining their aims and how to accomplish them. Reflectivity created students' understanding of freedom and allowed them to consider the consequences of activity directed by "free will." It was a tool of cognition, self-recognition and metacognition. It was also connected with the search for the sense of the engagement in new tasks; it meant considering their value and meaning in personal development. Students appreciated reflective learning they could experience, especially reflective self-cognition:

Thanks to these lessons, I learned how to make a reflection. Before, I didn't contemplate, and now I have learned to reflect. I have treated it as unnecessary and undeserved. But now I think it is necessary to stop and think; I have learned to do it.

Another significant element of learning culture and a process of its transformation was freedom. It was a dimension of autonomy appreciated by students that was—in the mosaic of autonomy of studying—connected with autonomy of actions. During the educational and research process I discovered a dynamic and complex structure of autonomy. I distinguished episodic autonomy, autonomy of action, autonomy of person, relational autonomy, autonomy of values, reflective autonomy and citizen autonomy. Each participant was characterized by his/her own structure of autonomy, which consisted of many its kinds, in many different compositions (Wołodźko, 2013). Autonomy of actions was spread between two poles:, engagement and distance; between a need to act, participate, come into existence and a need on one side to shelter, to avoid acting, to resist, on the other—to keep a distance, to be independent, to be free from desire of acceptance, to present cold attitude, even indifference. Engagement was a constitutive element of autonomy of studying in "diligent students," "reflective persons," and "open minds." "Minimalists" and "doubtful students" preferred shelter and resistance, and "free birds" independence and indifference. Autonomy of action, then, could distinguish positive autonomy (of engagement) and negative autonomy (of distance), related to the way students understood and experienced freedom. Engagement specified empowerment, a desire to participate and a feeling of effectiveness, optimism, joy of engagement, a need to be a leader or initiator of activity. Distance meant resistance and refusal, pessimism and reluctance toward unknown

tasks. These divisions revealed the ambivalent nature of autonomy, which could be a factor in transforming learning cultures in both positive and negative ways. As a consequence of the latter, students without sufficient cultural capital to manage the educational task or students whose great need for independence precluded successful involvement in the learning processes and personal development could be marginalized. Education toward autonomy should then be based on real analysis of students' individual differences and difficulties (of different origins also caused by the process of socialization) and to create a space for overcoming them through a reflective and positively autonomous activity.

CONCLUSIONS

If action research becomes a practice undertaken by academic teachers, it can be a chance for regaining autonomy in a higher education (lost in recent years through political, economic and legislative pressure) in promoting students and teachers' personal development. Action research causes a qualitative change in students' and teachers' educational participation. They become real partners in reflective cognitive processes, can overcome the borders of routine ("traditional") learning and teaching, create their own personal theories of participation in educational practices and—in consequence—undertake the task of transforming their learning culture. A key factor is participation in co-direction of the process of qualitative change in higher education space, an experience of authorship and empowerment (self-directed learning), and—what is especially important—a common participation in the research process of the emergent change, through undertaking research practices and critical self-reflection. The members of an educational community created during the research and educational processes can overcome the borders of knowledge acquisition, and those who are more engaged can even exceed the limitation of participation (Gołębnik, 2007). Those students can create new patterns of educational engagement and become "expanded learners" (Engeström & Sannino 2012) who independently perceive and formulate educational tasks according to their growing sense of empowerment and personal and educational responsibility. Such working students use metacognitive learning strategies, define their personal learning aims, and experience and test their own learning theories. They start to treat learning as a biographical and lifelong process. The reflection they undertake crosses the borders of educational settings and concerns their way of being in the world, together with Others, cooperating in re-building an unsatisfactory reality.

The knowledge constructed during the "combination" of the educational and research processes is taken 'in the activity and for the activity' (Reason & Torbert, 2010). Its role is to be "living theory" (McNiff, 2002), useful in the search for solving real problems. Knowledge becomes an instrument for understanding of the world and, together with reflection, a tool for changing it.

Action research space is friendly to students characterized by differentiated achievements (psychological, biographical, cultural differences), both for the "own-

ers” of high cultural capital and for their less-equipped colleagues. Each of them can experience and develop learning culture based on autonomy of studying. The key factor is engagement and effective participation in the educational community. Even “weak” students can develop their reflectivity, self-esteem, readiness for change, authenticity and responsibility for commonly realized tasks. Each of them has to struggle, to make an effort to overcome the barriers of the past, taken in the processes of school socialization habitus, which sets a heavy ballast in the process of learning patterns transformation. My research also showed a deconstructive role of many contexts (political, social, organizational, group) in the process of successful learning culture transformation toward autonomous learners and persons. It is, then, an open area to make the next (action) research plans.

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ACTION RESEARCH JAKO PRZESTRZEŃ TRANSFORMACJI KULTUR UCZENIA SIĘ

ABSTRAKT: Artykuł przedstawia trzyletni edukacyjny projekt *action research*, dotyczący autonomicznego i refleksyjnego uczenia się. Realizując go, studenci i nauczyciel akademicki uczestniczyli w procesie kształtowania edukacyjnej i badawczej wspólnoty, będąc aktywnie zaangażowanymi w wiele praktyk uczenia się. Te wzajemnie na siebie oddziałujące procesy kształtowały dynamiczną przestrzeń konstruowania i rekonstruowania kultur uczenia się uczestników.

Badania w działaniu – dzięki łączeniu edukacyjnych i badawczych aspektów aktywności studentów i wzajemnego oddziaływania praktyki i refleksji – generują szczególne warunki dla transformacji kultur uczenia się, od tradycyjnych do nowych, charakteryzujących się refleksyjnością, autentycznością i sprawstwem. Dynamika kultur uczenia wiązała się z różnymi, świadomie kreowanymi typami edukacyjnego uczestnictwa, które wpływały na autonomię studiowania (w jej różnych wymiarach i rodzajach), będącą, z kolei, konstytutywnym elementem kultur uczenia się uczestników.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: badania w działaniu, kultura uczenia się, uczestnictwo edukacyjne, autonomia.

