

DEFINITIONS FOR THE JULY INSTITUTE

ACTION RESEARCH in Social Science

A practical, problem solving activity attractive to practitioner-researchers who, along with other participants, have identified a problem during the course of their work and see merit in investigating it, and, if possible, of improving practice. By participants, we include all those whom the research is about (sometimes referred to as the consumers or beneficiaries) and assume that they are engaged in all aspects of the research process from problem definition to design and dissemination of findings.

Several useful definitions of action research include the following elements:

- essentially an on-the-spot procedure designed to deal with a concrete problem located in the immediate situation; an important feature is that the task is not finished when the project ends; the participants continue to review, evaluate and improve practice
- another essential feature in action research is the principle of deriving hypothesis from practice; i.e. the research questions arise from an analysis of the problems of the practitioners in the situation and the immediate aim then becomes that of understanding these problems.
- the researcher/actor at an early stage, formulates speculative, tentative, general principles in relation to the problem that have been identified; from these principles, hypotheses may then be generated about what action is likely to lead to the desired improvement in practice.
- this form of research is often directed at capacity building or skill transfer processes

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Community development work is founded on assumptions about the people having active and informed roles in the decisions which affect their lives; people learning collectively to challenge inequalities and social attitudes which discriminate against others; and people having skills and knowledge in bringing about positive change in communities valued and built on ways in which to extend participatory democracy (and includes the notion of personal and community empowerment). Community development work recognizes the need to celebrate diversity and differences and actively confronts oppression however it is manifested.

DISABILITY STUDIES CURRICULUM

Disability Studies has emerged as an academic discipline within the contexts of the disability rights and independent living movements which have advocated for civil rights and self-determination over the past three decades. Since the 1970s, this movement on behalf of the rights of persons with disabilities in Canada and the United States has achieved significant policy goals, and also helped in the emergence of Disability Studies programs by uniting academics and advocates in common concerns (Pfeiffer & Yoshida, 1998; Ryerson Polytechnic University, 1998).

An underlying premise of Disability Studies programs is that disability is a social construction, as opposed to a physiological or psychological phenomenon. This view does not deny the presence of impairments nor the physical and mental differences between individuals. Rather, this perspective stresses that "the nature and significance of these differences depends on how we view and interpret them" (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994). Thus, instead of focusing on ways of either "fixing" or socially segregating people with disabilities, Disability Studies promotes the critical analysis of society to disentangle impairments from the myth, ideology, and stigma that influence social interaction and social policy (Harris & Lewin, 1998).

The emphasis of Disability Studies programs is to apply social, cultural, historical and philosophical perspectives to the study of disability in society. Disability Studies examines the, "social, economic and political forces that for years have served to marginalize and oppress people with disabilities" and . . . "focuses on the idea that people with disabilities are a minority group who has been discriminated against. In this sense, the study of disability is similar to the study of race, class and gender inequalities" (Harris & Lewin, 1998, 1-2). Such scholarship challenges the idea that the economic and social status and the assigned roles of people with disabilities are inevitable outcomes of their condition (Pfeiffer & Yoshida, 1995).

This paradigm shift has meant that persons with disabilities, along with their advocates and allies, are taking an increasingly active role in demanding that society acknowledge their rights, eliminate barriers to full participation and provide appropriate supports. The intent of these interventions is to "enable people with disabilities to live in ways that are personally satisfying, socially useful and meet national and international standards of social well-being, human rights and citizenship" (Rioux, 1998, p. 1).