

# Po-keung Hui and Chak-Sang Pang

## DOING CULTURAL STUDIES IN THE HONG KONG EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

### A tale of two action research experiments

*The paper focuses on the close collaborative work our research team has been engaged in with two local schools to study how action research measures may help to facilitate the improvement of the Integrated Humanities (IH) curriculum through school–university partnerships. It attempts to understand action research as a form of cultural practice for education, and examines how such collaborative work with local schools may contribute to sustainable cultural work of education and intervene at different levels of the schooling practices. In all, the paper seeks to offer preliminary analysis and reflection on the re-orientation of Cultural Studies as a research and problem-solving, intellectual and critical project with a potential for long-term input to cultural policy-making. It also aims at examining the role of cultural studies practitioners as action researchers in the process of doing cultural work of education.*

**Keywords** teacher action research; school context; school–university partnerships; role of cultural researcher; action research as cultural studies method

### Introduction

Here's someone who's got maybe the power or the intellect to do something but they're not doing anything about it. All you want to do is research us. Ok we know these are what the problems are. We're sick and tired of people telling us we're like this. [Interview notes of one citizen of a local community in Australia, cited from Cameron and Gibson (2005, p. 316)]

In our proposal submitted to the Research Grants Council's Earmarked Research Grant for 2006/2007, we stated that one of the major concerns of our research project is to find ways that allow us, as cultural researchers/policy mediators/critical intellectuals who work in close collaboration with

secondary schools, to facilitate more effective implementation of the existing Integrated Humanities (IH) subject and the new Liberal Studies (LS) curriculum in local schools in Hong Kong.

Our interest in playing a more *critically-involved* role in the implementation phase of the curriculum reform emerged from our dissatisfaction with some previous studies on Hong Kong curriculum reform that basically describe the current situation and do no more than ‘telling us we’re like this’ (Morris 1996, pp. 119–139). However, we believe that cultural researchers who are concerned with quality education should also aim at making their research process and output more useful on the ground-level, where teachers and students operate and interact on a daily basis. As we argued in our research proposal,

[t]he cultural research report should not be taken as the closure of a self-contained analysis on paper, especially for a project that deals with ongoing issues of policy in the community. In this sense, *any involvement in cultural policy is an ongoing process*, much as any critical engagement in cultural research with a community-interface dimension would be (Bennett 1998, Giroux 1988, hooks 2003). In this light, *cultural research may indeed have a critical role to play in the process of policy planning and implementation*, which are not entirely separable. *A whole series of intellectual mediations – translation, communication, and nuanced critical intervention – will follow a policy statement or report before any effective policy outcomes are conceivable.*

(Chan, Choi & Hui 2006)<sup>1</sup>

Adding the action research (AR) component into our research project is hence one modest endeavor to critically intervene into the implementation phase of the education reform. Attempting to de-articulate and re-articulate some of the uncoordinated and routinized efforts that school administrators, teachers and students have continuously put into practice, our AR projects aim at searching for alternative measures that might assist schoolteachers to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the IH/LS curriculum, as well as to facilitate both the schoolteachers and university researchers to acquire the will and ability to think and act in a collaborative and sustainable way to deal with the pressing problems in our own educational contexts. The transformative potential of AR lies in the breaking free from habitual tendencies in repeating routinized and ritualized practices that consume teachers and students energies without producing too much constructive educational effects.

With this mission in mind, in 2007–2008 we have initiated two experimental AR projects on IH subject in collaboration with two local secondary schools in Hong Kong. This paper reflects on these two AR experiments, in which the complex dynamics of the school contexts have forced us, as university researchers, to critically rethink the potential and

limitation of feasible and constructive modes of school–university collaboration in the contemporary Hong Kong educational context.

The skeleton of this paper is as follows: first we will briefly introduce why and how we think that AR can be regarded as a Cultural Studies (CS) method, and why it is important to bring AR in the field of CS. The second part of this paper reports and discusses the two AR experiments that we have initiated, hoping to highlight the complexity of cultural process in the contemporary Hong Kong school context and the problems that both the schoolteachers and the university researchers have encountered when the AR projects are introduced. The third part of this paper analyses the macro social context in which the problem of time and cynicism arises. The last part is a concluding remark that aims at searching for alternative school–university collaborations to address the problems that we have encountered in these AR experiments.

### Cultural Studies (CS) and action research (AR)

Although the two intellectual projects, CS and AR, are often regarded as separated areas of studies, in this paper we prefer to view them as closely connected relatives, sharing a common methodological legacy, namely Marx's historical materialism.

According to Marx:

*The concrete totality is a totality of thoughts, concrete in thought, in fact a product of thinking and comprehending; but not in any way a product of the concept which thinks and generates itself outside or above observation and conception; a product, rather, of the working-up of observation and conception into concept.*

(Marx 1957–1958/1978, emphasis added)

In other words, 'the concrete totality' is not an empirical entity out there waiting to be represented through the activities of abstract thinking, but instead a 'totality of thoughts' that is itself a product of intellectual efforts of observation and conceptualization. Therefore, thought and concrete totality are not in binary opposition, and so are theory and practice, research and action. This dialectical mode of thinking that dissolves the kinds of binary oppositions between theory and practice is further elaborated in Hall (2003):

We need concepts more fundamentally dialectical in character. Concepts that allow us to further refine, segment, split and recombine any general category: which allow us to see those features which permitted it to play a certain role in this *epoch*, other features which were developed under the specific conditions of *that epoch*, distinctions which show why certain

relations appear *only* in the most ancient and the most developed forms of society *and* in *none* in *between*, etc.

(Hall 2003, p. 118, emphasis added)

Thus, a theoretical concept should not be ‘applied’ invariably to ‘explain’ the ‘concrete’ (or the ‘empirical’), but should be refined and corrected in different historical moments, in order to describe, analyze and help remake the social context for a particular project (cf. Grossberg 1997).

In addition to the shared legacy of Marx’s method, both intellectual projects of CS and AR aim at bringing forth social transformation and critical self-reflection, thus placing them in alliance with the mission of Critical Pedagogy. Many contemporary intellectual and political projects that could be regarded as AR and/or CS do not merely aim at making sense of the world, but also attempt to transform it towards a more meaningful and liveable space for the populace, particularly the marginal groups. To facilitate such kinds of social transformation, both CS and AR projects have emphasized the importance of understanding the social context in which their projects are situated, and to which their projects are trying to remake.

Despite their similarity and common legacy, we should also be aware of the particularity of these two intellectual–political projects. In fact, CS does not merely reiterate Marx’s method, it also supplements historical materialism by bringing ‘culture’ back in and giving it a central place in understanding the historical process and working out alternative measures.

That is, different from the material–deterministic tendency of Marxism, CS places the production and circulation of meaning at the center of political-economic-social theories and practices, and emphasizes the performative and communicative dimensions of the historical processes of various kinds of social changes.

Our understanding of ‘culture’ in this paper is further informed by Chan and Law’s (2011, in this issue) elaboration of Tony Bennett’s formulation in his *Culture: A Reformer’s Science*. Chan and Law suggest that ‘[c]ulture is not just a complex of meanings and values, but a field of government all its own, in which power operates technologically, *as a technology*.’ If culture is a technology, then it is not difficult to understand the fact that CS practitioners are indeed performing the role of a ‘cultural technician’. According to Bennett, ‘cultural technician’ does not aim at changing people’s consciousness, but focuses on the detailed operations of the political, economic and institutional regime of truth production, in order to search for more effective and meaningful ways of governance.

Likewise, although AR shared with Marx’s emphasis on the integration of theory and practice, as well as the concern of social transformation, its focus is more on the local context in which the AR practitioner is situated and wants to remake, comparing to the more macro-structural concerns that many Marxists have emphasized in their intellectual–political projects. AR is commonly

defined as the process of producing new knowledge through searching for solutions or improvements to practical questions in concrete situations, in which the action researcher is located. Action researchers are the problem owners who, in collaboration with other 'stakeholders', make happen transformative processes and outcomes in the specific problem context (cf. McKay & Marshall 2001, pp. 47–48). For some, the general aims of AR are to empower participants, produce new knowledge, and to facilitate social transformation in a sustainable way (Masters 1995); for others, AR could be used to create conditions for 'co-generative learning' among external experts and local participants (Greenwood 2007), or to shift away from macro-oppositional politics to a micro-politics of self-transformation 'in which new forms of subjectivity might be cultivated' (Cameron & Gibson 2005). Nevertheless, AR is generally concerned with how research should be done in particular social (or local) contexts and formulating action plans that improve current situations, in order to solve practical problems that action researchers encounter in their daily work. Therefore, the method adopted for doing research and implementing the action plan must be compatible with the action researcher's working condition and social parameters.

Nevertheless, for action researchers, and CS practitioners as well, action and research are not separated and oppositional activities. Action needs research for a better understanding of the context and for clarifying the objectives and constituency of the project. Research needs action to take practical effects on the ground level. One may even argue that actions that effectively address complex practical problems in a particular social context must inevitably involve well-planned research activities, whereas research work that facilitates reflective thinking and problem solving in concrete situations can also be regarded as some kinds of effective action.

Hence, both the CS practitioners and action researchers engage in intellectual and political projects that attempt to de-articulate and re-articulate existing social forces, to connect theory with practice, project aims with actions, and to recognize and negotiate with the limits and possibilities in a concrete historical context. It is in this sense that we are inclined to view practicing AR in the Hong Kong educational context as a new endeavor of doing CS.

## **A tale of two AR experiments**

Since March 2007, in collaboration with teachers of two secondary schools (School A and School B) in Hong Kong, we have initiated two AR experiments on the IH subjects.<sup>2</sup> The first one has to do with the schoolteachers' practical problems, and the second one is related to our (the university researchers') interests in improving the quality of cultural research. These two AR initiatives

are not conducted separately, but rather as two closely connected parallel research and action cycles (cf. McKay & Marshall 2001, pp. 50–52).

The first AR project is owned by schoolteachers and is designed to address and resolve their immediately practical problems. In this research project, the university's researchers' role is to offer basic support (such as coordinating meetings and minute taking) to facilitate the schoolteachers to handle the most pressing problems in their institutional context. The second AR initiative belongs to the university researchers and the objective is two-fold. On the one hand, we have it in mind to encourage schoolteachers, as a group, to be willing and able to confront the 'community of practice' – a community in which ways of doing things are predetermined by unreflective tradition and habit – that is often seen in the contemporary Hong Kong educational landscape; and to covet and work towards the building of 'a community of inquiry' – a community in which the unifying principle is inquiry, learning and critical reflection for improving the quality and effectiveness of daily practices that are articulated with teachers' desired educational objectives (cf. Eikeland 2006). On the other hand, we also want to critically review the existing cultural research approaches, as well as to offer a new perspective in understanding education as a complicated cultural process (cf. Chan and Law's paper in this issue). Our ultimate goal is to search for an innovative, integrative model of doing research and actions with meaningful effects in the area of education in Hong Kong.

In both schools, most teachers have neither the expertise nor the training to do what is actually needed for effective teaching and evaluating the new interdisciplinary school subject, namely IH. Our work, through meeting with teacher-action-researchers in both schools, is basically to work with schoolteachers to co-facilitate the clarification of the objectives and the alignment between mission, implementation and evaluation of their AR projects – to understand schoolteachers' own AR problems more specifically, to systematically assess the school and social contexts that are relevant to their AR projects, and to formulate action plans and evaluation schemes that are in alignment with their AR projects' objectives.

In the course of a series of AR meetings between schoolteachers and the Lingnan University Action Research (LN AR) team, questions proposed by the teachers in both schools are increasingly clarified and some action plans proposed by the schoolteachers for fixing the problems are tried out. Yet the progress of the AR projects is much slower than the LN AR team originally expected. We increasingly realized that with the presence and mediation of university researchers in the monthly AR meetings, schoolteachers were indeed encouraged and stimulated to think through their AR problems and to look for possible solutions, thus keeping the AR initiatives going. However, when returning to our daily routine works after the AR meetings, it seems that schoolteachers, unlike the university researchers who have more incentive and institutional space and time to conduct research, were unable (or not willing?)

to spend too much time on the AR projects. Their time and energy for the AR projects have very often been absorbed by the more immediate mundane duties.<sup>3</sup> In an institutional setting in which research work is not regarded as a mundane duty integrated into the whole learning and teaching process, some teachers may even regard the AR project as an additional burden that adds to their already heavy workload.

In response to this predicament, the LN AR team tempted to take up a more 'participatory' and 'proactive' role in the process, hoping to create more space and time resource for the teachers to work on their AR projects. The LN team proposed to offer the schoolteachers our expertise and manpower to take up some of their routine lessons (such as providing public lectures for their students) and provide reference materials in some topics of the IH curriculum for them, hoping to earn teachers in both schools more time to work on the AR projects. We also revealed that we were willing to take up some of the research work that was directly related to their AR projects, such as reviewing and analyzing past examination papers and students' answers for School A, and conducting a questionnaire survey to find out why students were not eager to hand in their homework for School B. Both schools' teachers did not ask for the first kind of assistance, and School A's response to our second suggestion was positive, while School B counter-proposed to us that they wanted us to conduct an extensive survey on the impacts of teaching IH for them. Their different responses to our offers may have to do with the different nature of the assistance that we proposed.<sup>4</sup> We did the evaluation exercise for School A and the survey for School B and reported back to the respective IH panels in late 2008, and schoolteachers' responses were generally positive.<sup>5</sup> However, after the report section, no further AR proposals were initiated from both schools.<sup>6</sup>

The not-so-enthusiastic attitudes of schoolteachers from both Schools A and B towards the AR projects has to be understood in the contexts of the schools and the wider society, as teachers always take on contextual factors to define what action to take and when to take them (depending on the urgency and tension perceived in their school contexts). The three AR questions are indeed pressing questions that teachers of Schools A and B are really concerned with, provided they are given the time and space to deal with them and to reflect on their routine practices. However, the fact is that, in the contemporary school and social contexts (more later), teachers in Hong Kong are more often than not occupied by daily teaching and administrative duties and hence become too busy to spare time to think and do inquiry work. As a result, their energy has largely been consumed by all sorts of routine practices that are very often uncoordinated and disconnected. Without continuous reflective inputs generating from quality and systematic AR work, schoolteachers who are forced to take care of lots of uncoordinated and disconnected duties are very easily entrapped in a state of disorientation and even cynicism (see Chan & Hui 2008).

This has forced us to critically rethink the effectiveness of our (the LN AR team's) project. As the objectives of our own AR initiative are to encourage and facilitate schoolteachers to shift from 'a community of practice' to 'a community of inquiry', as well as to improve the quality of our cultural research to deepen our understanding of the educational process, we adopt two different sets of criteria to measure the effectiveness of our AR project. To evaluate our work in accomplishing the first objective, we have to look at the extent that schoolteachers have desired and been willing to spend more time on research/inquiry works that are related to the educational objectives that they themselves endorsed, or even to transform into 'a community of inquiry' – a group of teachers in a particular institutional setting that acquire the habits, intellectual ability and technical skills that make it easier to think through and work on context-specific practical problems. Facilitating schoolteachers to effectively address their AR problems is very important in this regard, because this could convincingly show to the schoolteachers that inquiry works are indeed useful and practical in solving their immediate problems. To assess how far we have achieved our second objective, we have to look at the extent that we have deepened our understanding on education as a complicated cultural process.

Looking back at our involvement in these AR experiments, we increasingly realized that the schooling process, as a cultural process, are much more complicated than we originally anticipated. We must admit that, in contrast with the teachers who have heavily invested in the way they see and do things in the school context, we, as outside researchers who visits schools just occasionally, do not have enough knowledge to thoroughly understand their constraints, working culture and internal politics. Yet from the two AR experiments we realize that in addition to the institutional constraints and possibilities, there are also problems involving teachers' perception of what is meaningful educational work. The unwillingness of teachers to spend more time and be more proactive in the AR projects perhaps reflects both problems. That is, their low motivation to take research work more seriously reflects both the lack of resources, support, and time that is necessary for them to engage in any meaningful AR work, and their peculiar understanding of what is 'teaching and learning'.

By looking at and analyzing the larger social context in which the schooling practices are situated, we may be able to understand better (at the macro level) why and how Hong Kong teachers are unable/unwilling to spend more time on doing AR. Whereas engaging in our own AR experiment has allowed us to come closer to the teachers' existential state, hence helping us to grasp what is going on in the micro-process, thus supplementing our macro analysis on teachers' constraints.



## The macro social context

Hong Kong is moving towards 'a culture of new capitalism' (cf. Sennett 2006) in which short-term rather than long-term results are rewarded, and immediate, fragmented and small tasks become the emphasis. In such a context where 'impatience' prevails, workers in different sectors are normally not encouraged to develop specific and solid skills, but instead emphasis is put on the development of superficial talent. Traditional craftsmanship that requires the mastery and control of content-specific knowledge and aims at pursuing quality is now replaced by superficial talent (or potential ability) that emphasizes purely operational thinking.<sup>7</sup> In this 'skill-based economy,' quickly getting the job done, regardless of the quality of the outputs produced, is an effective way to survive. In such an institutional context in which impatience is the norm and short-term results are encouraged, engaging in time-consuming inquiry and learning process in which learners and practitioners are allowed to make (and learn from their own) mistakes become extremely difficult (Sennett 2006).

In particular, the education sector has also been transformed increasingly towards the extremity of this 'new culture'. The schooling process has been transformed from examination-oriented training to education reform with multiple objectives and vague vision.<sup>8</sup> Teachers who were familiar with the craftsmanship of training students' subject content and techniques for examination are now facing new challenges. They are asked to nurture students' 'generic skills' such as critical thinking, multiple perspectives and problem solving, as well as to broaden students' knowledge (read 'information') and to develop students' all sorts of positive values, within a very limited time period. Yet as the public examination is still in place for screening students, and the curriculum and school environment are yet to provide the adequate resources and supports for teachers to be able to transform themselves to meet this new challenges, it is therefore extremely difficult for teachers to take the education reform seriously. Because of that, teachers' perception of meaningful education is not completely matching with what the government has advocated. As a result, teachers' time and energy are not necessarily spent effectively in relation to the main objectives of the education reform.

The average working hours of Hong Kong teachers is around 50–70 hours, and teachers spend most of their time in a classroom teaching, preparing lessons, marking assignments and grading examination scripts, activities that are described as 'work related to teaching and learning'.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that although teachers have already spent most of their time on these 'teaching-and-learning related' activities, they still want to spend more time on these works and with their students by asking for more resources and cutting 'non-teaching related' administrative duties (such as preparing documents, learning about new reform policies, attending school meetings and so on).

What is ‘(non) teaching-and-learning-related work’? What kind of resources and work really facilitate students’ effective and meaningful learning? Seen through the eyes of the students, whether classroom lecturing, preparing lessons, marking assignments and grading examination scripts are necessarily ‘learning related’ activities becomes problematic. From our records of interviews with school students, remarks like ‘the subject content is silly and not related to our everyday life’, ‘those things taught by our teachers is useless, because I will forget them immediately right after the class’, ‘I have already learnt all these “personal development” stuffs in primary school’, ‘it would be better if less homework are given to us’, ‘It’s boring, I don’t know what he/she [the teacher] is talking about’, and ‘I am not interested in doing homework’, etc. are not uncommon. It is worth noting that not all these negative feedbacks were pointing at passionless or lazy teachers. In fact, most of the teachers we interviewed are hardworking and genuinely care about their students, and are willing to spend time on all sorts of ‘teaching and learning related’ activities. Similarly, although not particularly enthusiastic in actively participating in classroom activities and doing homework, most students we interviewed are also well-disciplined and are capable of learning.

What we want to argue here is that those ‘teaching and learning related’ activities initiated by teachers are not necessarily facilitating meaningful learning in a student’s sense. Hence a series of questions follow: what are the actual effects for students immersed in all sorts of ‘teaching and learning related activities’ initiated by teachers? Are the educational effects desirable? Are teaching-related works really facilitating students’ learning in a meaningful way? Would reduction in homework, project, and examination necessarily be harmful to students’ learning? Is spending more time on school administrative work really irrelevant to the improvement of students’ learning quality? Taking these questions seriously is a sign of coming closer to the ideal of ‘a community of inquiry’. And the ultimate goal of our AR initiatives is to collaborate with schoolteachers to facilitate ourselves to be in agreement with these questions, and to be able to co-generate intellectual ability and technical skills that are useful for addressing these important questions effectively and enjoyably.

### **Concluding remarks - doing CS in the local education context**

With the engagement in the earlier AR experiments that aim at critically intervening into the complex schooling and pedagogical process, we are re-orienting ourselves in doing CS and cultural research in the local education context. From these two AR experiments, we realize that ‘reforming’ education was a long-term cultural process. Macroscopic and analytical insights, as well as skilful craftsmanship for effectively mastering cultural technologies, are extremely important to keep things moving on the right

track. Learning to conduct dedicated work that tightly aligns mission with action in complex local school contexts is crucial for transforming the culture of new capitalism (Sennett 2006) and for holding up the dissemination of the cynical culture and anti-intellectual practices (Chan & Hui 2008).

Our small AR experiments have forced us to rethink the relevance and usefulness of critical knowledge produced by critical pedagogy and CS for schoolteachers and students. If unreflective routine practices and cynical mentality are immune from any critique of ideology, then the only way to facilitate constructive transformation in the education settings is to reform the cultural process through de-articulating and re-articulating elements and procedures of doing things, including the construction of a new mode of school–university collaboration.

After the two experiments came to an end in late 2008, we increasingly realize that the existing modes of collaboration between the university and school should be thoroughly rethought. Instead of merely offering one-off services or research and development projects either initiated by the university or initiated by school panel members, it would be much better if schoolteachers, administrators and university researchers are all involved in the planning stage, from which necessary space and resource (particularly time resource) for teachers to participate in the collaborative projects should be negotiated and facilitated. However, this does not mean merely injecting monetary resources into the schools, for this may often create more problems than resolutions. The center of attention of any kind of university–school collaborative projects should be the close articulation of the project objectives, implementation processes, evaluation schemes and the particular context of the school. On a more concrete level, university researchers have to consider the problems that schoolteachers have been encountering and to assist them to negotiate with the school administrators and government in order to find new space and resources for schoolteachers to think and act. Sometimes this is easier to be achieved by reducing teachers' 'teaching-learning related tasks' as discussed earlier, by means of significantly cutting the school-based curriculum content and pedagogical activities that are not related to the mission and vision of the school in general, and the IH subject curriculum objectives in particular. This is of course not an easy task, as reducing workload for students and teachers is not only opposed by the government, the business sector and parents, but more importantly may even be opposed by the teachers themselves.

To facilitating the development of a community of inquiry and a pedagogy of hope, the university action researchers/CS practitioners have to be very careful in working with schoolteachers to look for pragmatic as well as intellectually sound alternatives in their specific school contexts. In order to do so, the university researchers also have to make room for ourselves. In addition to the routine practices such as applying for study leave and external financial resource for teaching remission, more radical proposals such as job-sharing or

setting up semi-private research and development institutions to tap in to resources and employ full-time supporters for schoolteachers could also be considered. While we have to remind ourselves that university researchers should not dismiss and replace schoolteachers' contextual knowledge and decisions that are sensible and effective for addressing the local problems, we should at the same time be willing and able to collaborate with schoolteachers to make room for ourselves to confront the unreflective habits and cynical practices that produce all sorts of negative and destructive effects.

In sum, participating in these AR projects has helped us to further clarify the potential and limitation of doing CS in the local education context. In particular, this AR experiment has forced us to think through the following question: How can the critical knowledge produced by CS and critical pedagogy be effectively translated into 'practical' knowledge that could help researchers and schoolteachers to improve their situation?

## Notes

- 1 This paper is the outcome of the collective efforts based on the research project led by Steven Chan, Po-keung Hui, Muriel Law, and Chak-Sang Pang at the Kwan Fong Cultural Research and Development Programme of Lingnan University with the support of a two-year Research Grants Council (Hong Kong) grant.
- 2 School A is a Band 1 school whose incoming students rank in the top 30% in the district in terms of their primary school grades, and its graduates obtain relatively good public examination results. It's medium of instruction is Chinese. With more than 20 years experiences in offering IH courses, the IH teachers are often asked to support other schools on IH teaching and learning. In contrast, School B is a new school that started its operation in 2006, and the examination performances of its students are relatively poor. School B's mission emphasizes on creative education and the facilitation of its students' development in critical thinking and media competency. To achieve this, it offers a school-based curriculum on creativity, aiming at supplementing the conventional academic subjects to enrich students' learning.

We had interviewed the principal, IH teachers and students of both Schools A and B, and had participated in some of their internal meetings and seminars from March to July in 2007. Based on the preliminary observations of these stock-taking research that were summarized and reported back to the IH panels and senior managers of the schools, three AR projects were initiated in these two schools in August 2007. The AR project for School A

- (five IH teachers involved) is ‘How to set an examination paper that can effectively test students’ “higher-order thinking” and that for School B are ‘How to deal with the problem that students did not hand in their assignments’ (two IH teachers involved) and ‘How to effectively integrate the school-based creative curriculum with the IH subject’ (one IH teacher and one creative-curriculum teacher involved). In 2008, School B’s two AR projects were merged into one that aimed at developing a model of project learning in which students are motivated to hand in projects on time and academic subject and creativity programme are also integrated.
- 3 In fact, without the AR project in place, teachers were still able to continue the business as usual, such as producing the exam paper on or before the deadline. As conducting research to find out how to set an exam paper that could examine ‘higher-order thinking’ or effectively integrating different curriculum is not part of their mundane tasks, the AR projects are understandably not always their top priority.
  - 4 It seems to us that conducting research works (such as reviewing their past exam papers) for schoolteachers is more acceptable than replacing their teaching roles in the classroom. It is because unlike the second kind of offering, the first kind of assistance does not involve complicated rearrangement of schoolteachers routine teaching work, as well as challenging teachers’ professional image and status.
  - 5 School A’s teachers appreciated our facilitation in clarifying some of their blind-spots in setting the exam question and grading the papers, as well as what ‘higher-order thinking’ meant to them. School B’s teachers found that some of the survey results are stimulating and useful for their reflection and future planning.
  - 6 A teacher of School A frankly told us that they did not even have the time to think through what kind of assistance they may need from us.
  - 7 In Sennet’s (2006, pp. 121–122) words, this superficial ‘talent search cuts reference to experience and the chains of circumstance, eschews sensate impressions, divides analyzing from believing, ignores the glue of emotional attachment, penalizes digging deep—a state of living in pure process which the philosopher Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquid modernity”.’ Through the construction of the image of an idealized self that can prosper in an uncertain world and avoid the shame and fear of dependence, this new work culture is transmitted to the public organizations, including schools.
  - 8 This includes eight learning areas, nine common generic skills and multiple values in five basic learning experiences.
  - 9 In contrast, administration work including communicating with parents and government officials are counted as irrelevant tasks. See <http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr06-07/chinese/panels/ed/papers/ed0212cb2-1041-6-c.pdf> and <http://www.hkptu.org/stresssurvey/index.htm>.

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