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Abstract

I discuss a unique action research (AR) pedagogical experience of professors at four public universities (Damascus, Aleppo, Al-Ba'ath, and Tishreen) in the Syrian Arab Republic. The approach in this experience began by contextualizing some lessons and experiences of AR pedagogy at Cornell University and issues about university reform in a very different cultural and academic setting, under the program "Higher Education and Training Program in Contemporary Social Sciences (HETPCSS)."

This collaborative program in Syria was a unique opportunity to address new dimensions of action research in a developing country, where a real gap exists in paying attention to many aspects of conducting any serious research in the social sciences and the humanities. The program was intended to partially remedy this gap through introducing AR in Syria.

Few are those universities in the US or Europe that have contextualized AR and the relation between university and society in an effective pro-social way. The experience of the Syrian universities is unique in that some of their professors are being educated in AR despite the adverse national political and economic conditions. One may even suggest that we are able to educate these professors in action research because of the contemporary adverse conditions.

I. Introduction

While I have been collaborating on AR projects in Syria for the past ten years, this project was my first to teach about AR. This was also the first time to collaborate with social science and the humanities university professors to facilitate their own learning AR in order to change the Syrian higher education system from within.[1] What impressed me the most during the four-month program (January through April, 2006) was the enthusiasm with which the professors were willing to collaborate and take extra efforts to achieve their potentials under HETPCSS;[2] that is, the potential of

being educated in Action Research in spite of, or because of adverse conditions in the four Syrian public universities.

The overall goal of the HETPCSS program was to bring a self-selected, self-motivated group of faculty and researchers (from among the 55 who were initially selected by their respective deans) into a deeper familiarity with state-of-the-art of contemporary social science research, focusing on AR approaches (theories, methods, and tools). The immediate goal was to solidify the steps and dialogues that the Syrian government has initiated in 2001,[3] by creating a concrete, hands-on experience deploying some AR perspectives and methods. AR was introduced as a research modality in which these professional researchers and members of a community organization form a single research team that decides the subject of the research, learns about and selects appropriate techniques, collects and analyzes the data, and assists in the process of applying the results to the institution as well as to other societal infrastructures. In this case, the participating professors formed a research team among themselves while collaborating with their own academic community.

Although I experienced some resistance for being a US citizen, my Syrian descent helped in building a rapport with the professors. Also, my ability to communicate in Arabic and being familiar with the culture proved to be a key factor in the progress and success of the program.[4] The professors were concerned regarding imported programs, but once I introduced the program and its approach to social change, they realized that it was a change by them and for them. I emphasized the balance between learning contemporary scientific research while maintaining a connection to, and generating a better understanding of their Arabic/Islamic heritage. This balance opened a space for them to rethink scientific research from within. Asmahan, an Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, expressed this sentiment after I had explained the philosophical foundations of the program: "Yes, this is the key: 'equilibrium' with local heritage, I like that."[5]

The long-term goal was to further develop the professors existing capabilities into the collaborative program to address relevant issues to the Syrian society, using local knowledge and integrating the Islamic/Arabic heritage of the participants with contemporary knowledge of scientific research.[6] It was remarkable that all the professors chose the issue of "conducting scientific research at the university" as the focus theme and the content of their hands-on action research. Their enthusiasm, driven by their intuitive needs to learn and to change the status quo of scientific research, seems to balance the existing bureaucratic system of the university.

My research questions were: Would it be possible for the collaborators in the HETPCSS, including myself, to:
(1)   "[R]ealize the complex interaction among private (individual) and public (social) discourse in social and educational programs," (Barazangi, 2006a: 98) wherein the individual is rarely given attention in the organizational behavior of the Syrian university? In other words, would the

collaborators be able to teach and learn AR in a way that helps to move beyond "gathering and using scattered techniques and models" in the centralized Syrian educational system?

(2)   "[R]ecognize that investigating each other's views of reality as the first step toward cognitive, affective, and social egalitarianism," wherein these professors hardly have the opportunity and the flexibility to investigate their own perception of learning and of scientific research?

While I was facilitating for the professors the adoption of "principles from different disciplines," I was specifically concerned about the "ethical integration [of these principles], [so] they [will not] lose their potency [nor] remain merely isolated tools that may or may not foster the [professors'] acquisition of competence in AR." (Barazangi, 2006a: 100). Therefore, this collaborative experience would be considered ethical if it increased the Syrian professors' ability to break away from the mind-set of seeing scientific research mostly as (1) a means for promotion and/or as expanded commentary on an existing work, (2) a top-down organizational process, be it at the university level or within the Ministry of Higher Education (MHE) and the Supreme Council of Sciences (SCS), the two sponsors of the program, (3) a critique of theories and methodologies that do not fit the dominant ideology or perception of what constitutes scientific research, or (4) an individual efforts wherein keeping one's ideas to oneself is thought to preserve the credit for scientific production.

Throughout the program, the fifty five (55) professors of different fields went through a process of balancing this internal bureaucratic system with what was perceived as an external political pressure for change. Though external pressure might have motivated the government to initiate minor changes, the internal enthusiasm of individuals or groups was slowed down by the existing institutional bureaucracy. Change of conception (or the mind-set) was the most relevant issue to these professors and, hence, became both the immediate goal and the means of the program. That is, in order for the clients (the professors) to understand and deploy AR, they needed to put themselves in a different mind-set to be able to re-think the meaning of scientific research. This goal and the process that led to achieving it are the topics of this paper. It is fair to conclude that we achieved this goal and established a framework for systemizing and institutionalizing contemporary scientific research within the social sciences and humanities at the Syrian higher education level.

II. Dimensions of the Pedagogical Interaction and the Process

Equipped with a formalized understandings and knowledge of AR pedagogy, I thought I could collaborate with these professors by directing their intuitive need to learn contemporary scientific research, offering them an opportunity to contextualize AR principles: "reposition [ing] teachers, learners, and evaluators in a more explicit partnership, and challeng[ing] the dichotomous relationship between rhetoric and action found in the conventional pedagogy [and their practice] of the social sciences" in the Syrian academic setting. (Barazangi, 2006a: 98) Though the learning

professors were "determin [ing] the authenticity of a principle vis-à-vis the variations in its interpretation and social application . . . out of awareness," at the onset of the project, they began the conscious process when they determined to research their own issues, enhancing their capacity to act on their own behalf. (Young, 1990)

As the principal investigator and the director of the program, I began by introducing the program and a brief description of AR. I had pre-prepared (September - December, 2005) the contextualized self-learning online primer of AR, "Deploying and Evaluating Action Research" (Barazangi, 2006b), as the approach of social research for social change. Having recently completed a collaborative project (2001-2004) with Davydd Greenwood and with Cornell University undergraduate students learning and evaluating AR (Barazangi et al., 2004), and having collaborated (1995-97) with some professors, researchers, and undergraduate students at the Syrian Higher Institute for Applied Sciences and Technology on developing a research-based computerized curriculum in the Arabic language environment (Barazangi, 1999), I recognized that a collaborative project working with the professors themselves on their own learning of AR was in order. That is, though my previous Syrian collaborators realized their own capacity to act on their own, they were, with few exceptions, not able to "hold back their own interest for the collective benefit when necessary," as they continued to "perceive themselves as authoritarian experts." (Barazangi, 2006a: 100)

Fifty-five professors from three colleges (Education, Economics, and Arts and Sciences) of each university participated in the first stage of the three-stage HETPCSS program. Brain storming sessions took place at each of the four universities, but only 31 of the professors continued into the next stage. Given that some of them did not fulfill the three conditions for participation (i. e., considerable time commitment, reasonable mastery of the English language, and a working computer literacy and Internet skills), they withdrew reluctantly, and only after a lengthy discussion about the unfair condition to conduct the program in English.

Stage two of the program consisted of simultaneously going through the online course and organizing into work groups who would launch their selected projects. As the spring semester began in the middle of February 2006, and the teaching and administrative load became overwhelming, only 23 professors completed this stage. Yet, despite a slow Internet connection and some technical difficulties, all participants made special efforts to access the online course material and participate in a web-based bibliographic search.

Stage three was devoted to discussing the evolution of the projects and analyzing the results, all the while reflecting on the process. At the completion of the program, 14 professors presented preliminary results of their projects in a public seminar, expressing the transformation of their views of themselves and of scientific research. Together, and along with some administrators and research directors, we discussed these results and generated a list of recommendations and future action plans,

which was a break from the hierarchical decision-making structure of the Syrian higher education system.

A. Stage One

During the first stage, each university group participated in one or two brain-storming sessions to discuss the state of teaching and research in their respective universities. Though some participants expressed uneasiness about the ambiguity of the program (Barazangi et al., 2004), a preliminary list of relevant social and intellectual issues emerged. During the second brain storming session, a few samples of the issues were selected to be the focus of their experiential learning/teaching/research workshops. The professors were eager to express their frustration with the obstacles to conduct research, generating a new local knowledge by summing up the adverse conditions at the universities as follows:[7]

(1) delivering and disseminating information [or the lack of], (2) poor conditions of the university libraries, such as low number of periodicals and no space for research activities, (3) little or no skills in using the Internet, or to conduct research, and particularly no English language skills. (4) low income of professors making it difficult to devote time to research, (5) no societal support for female professors, (6) delay in publishing professors' research in the university periodical, making it harder to follow-up scientific development,[8] (7) high cost of conferences and workshops outside the country with the expectation that professors would cover most of such costs, (8) large number of students, (9) confusion of culture with societal or ideological traditions , and (10) little professorial input into consideration for university reform.[9]

The professors were uncomfortable with my posting their views to the inter- and intra-university e-mail lists that I developed, despite their hunger for sharing "new" knowledge. This resistance might be attributed to difficulty with the English language or with accessing the Internet, lack of time, or fear to expose their views to wider audience. Nonetheless, given that one of the main objectives of the MHE was to create more interaction between universities, the work groups were re-organized into cross-university and by discipline.

B. Stage Two

During the second stage, all the groups participated in a set of four workshops divided according to discipline (i.e., all professors in the Arts and Sciences were grouped in one workshop). The work groups began prioritizing the samples of social and intellectual issues that they had generated. It was striking that all the work groups individually chose the issue of "conducting scientific research at the university" as the focus theme. A mid-program workshop was held at the end for the entire research team (all the groups) at a central place, Al-Ba'ath University. The objective of this workshop was to collectively discuss and choose from among the seven (7) sub-themes that the

professors prioritized for their research, such as women's academic career and research work, advantages and disadvantages of the ministry-assigned textbooks, and organizational behavior of the university.

Each of the seven within- or across-campus work groups selected a sub-theme and determined its research question(s), the research designs, the suitable methodologies and tools. Using survey tools, such as questionnaires, interviews, and some participatory observation, each work group, as a group or as individuals, began collecting information from their respective colleagues at the different departments and colleges. They began deploying some principles of AR by investigating the real issues that they and their colleagues encounter as they attempt to break away from the bureaucratic procedures in their respective university. One of these principles was to exercise their capability of taking charge of their own professional destiny, despite the constraining centralized system and the demanding teaching and administrative duties.

Even as they generated new knowledge about their own experience with AR as the approach to scientific research, the clients, the professors themselves, went through conceptual change as they discovered their self-generated meanings. During the workshops they compared field notes and discussed the deployment of AR concepts and principles, such as discussing the responses with the colleagues being interviewed (the client community) and reflecting with them to validate the findings. I continued to post these field notes to the e-mail list to be shared across the groups, despite the few who exchanged notes with me on the Internet. What was notable about this process were (1) that they became more at ease with openly exchanging their views about the state of the university; (2) their initial reluctance to speak out was replaced by open critique of each others' views and sharing their ideas; (3) their complaints about inability to conduct surveys without getting permission from their chairs, deans, or university presidents were replaced by a confidence in their ability to generate further enthusiasm among their respective colleagues in the academic community to grant interviews; and (4) they began competing to share their preliminary results and to interact with the rest of the groups.

The professors were challenged by the idea of initiating, but in this experience they realized it was possible to do so in spite of the limitations and obstacles that they listed over and over again. To help them move away from the defeatist state-of-mind, I asked one working group to make a list of their weekly tasks, including the time spent and the expenses incurred. The results produced a telling qualitative assessment of their daily struggle, and were instrumental in developing some recommendations.

C. Stage Three

Another set of three workshops was held a month later. This time the work groups were re-organized to compare relevant notes concerning the sub-themes. During this third and final stage, the groups presented and discussed the process and decided on the outlines of their working papers,

despite much resistance to commit their thinking to writing. It was remarkable to see the transformation in the discussion, from a negative mind-set to high interest in deepening educational network among each other, and among the four universities. By the end of the program they merged into a single research team with the intention to continue their communication and collaboration with each other and with me.

During a public seminar program at the end of March, fourteen professors presented their working papers in a ministry-sponsored seminar, where they also held small group discussions with invited deans and directors of research to make their input based on the findings. Together, we generated future actions for further collaboration with each other, with the MHE, and with me, wherein the SCS along with their respective universities offered commitment of support for future help. Two follow-up meetings in April 2006 were held to gage the professors' reflections on the program and each individual interest in follow-up commitments.[10].

The seminar fulfilled its goal by generating recommendations and decisions for future actions. By presenting their preliminary results, the fourteen professors indirectly encouraged other professors to tell their part of the story. It became clear then that change was possible when they themselves started to systemize the process and, consequently, realized the meaning of change from the bottom-up. Also, administrators and others who were attending were surprised to see the ease with which the professors spoke up, even giving interviews to a local newspaper reporter.[11] Despite the wide spread practice of top-down decision-making, the open, systemized dialogue throughout the program helped the professors realize that they could be hopeful that their systemized analysis and recommendations might be taken into consideration for future plans.

III. Uniqueness of the Experience

The collaborative program in Syria was a unique opportunity to address new dimensions of action research in a developing country, where a real gap exists in the attention to many aspects of conducting any serious research in the social sciences and the humanities. HETPCSS was intended to partially remedy this gap through introducing AR in Syria. Preliminary discussions suggest that educating in AR at the level of higher education was more effective when the professors saw their ability to conduct any scientific research as the priority. This revelation was the first achievement of the program, focusing on what facilitates or deters from doing scientific research, or what deters from doing social research for social change in the Syrian universities. Such social change involves members who could control their destinies and improve their capacities to do so.

The educational system at the time was responding to multiple sources of tension that may have indirectly caused some resentment to any outside intervention, let alone the way in actually doing research.[12] However, being a U.S. citizen of Syrian descent eased the collaborating professors into accepting me as an "insider," and trusting the goals of HETPCSS. The dialogue process also

helped them focus on realizing that any social change has to come from them and be for their own benefit and the benefit of their constituents, the students. Personal communication and familiarity with the culture proved to be key factors in alleviating some of the tension and resentment and in sustaining the progress of the program. For example, only two colleges had responded to an earlier communiqué from the MHE and the SCS that included my "Action Plan" of the program. Yet, after individual meetings (throughout January 2006) with each of the presidents, deans, and associate deans for scientific affairs at each of the twelve colleges, briefing them about the program and its relevance to their respective colleges, I received full support and was provided contact information with the nominated professors.

A third unique characteristic of the experience was the introduction of the online course during the second stage of the program, an innovation that encountered significant technical obstacles. Despite the availability of computers in the Syrian education system for over ten years, very few professors and administrators were skilled in using them. There was no faculty and staff development policy in place, either. Hence, part of the online course was orienting some of the participants in using the Internet and some software. Not all the computer labs were well equipped, or networked for Intranet purposes, so most of the workshops were held at the ministry lab in Damascus to which all professors were willing to travel, sometimes at their own expense and time (farthest commuting was from the city of Aleppo, four hours by car). The SHERN www.shern.net (Syrian Higher Education & Research Network) website (sponsored by the MHE to connect the four public universities with each other and with the ministry) was not equipped for interactivity, thus, not well utilized by the professors or administrators of the universities beyond descriptive introductions. Despite these technical problems, all participants accessed the online course material and participated in a web-based bibliographic search.

The professors' enthusiasm seems to be driven by their intuitive needs to learn and to change the status quo of scientific research at the university while keeping respect for their local heritage (Maqdisi, 1981; Nashashabe, 1989; Stanton, 1990; Totah, 1926). When we met in groups, they were anxious to access the web for bibliographic references. But they were also anxious to go through the steps of the online AR Primer with me, because most of them needed my Arabic interpretation of the AR principles before they could deploy them in their own research projects. When we met individually, most of those who took the time to come to the MHE wanted to discuss in depth the particular sub-theme that they were researching, as well as the related AR principles and theories.

IV. Conclusions: Evaluation and Reflection on the AR Educational Process

Given that only a few universities in the US or Europe have contextualized AR and the relation between university and society in an effective pro-social way, my experience with the Syrian professors is especially notable. Some of the participating professors in the social sciences and the

humanities learned AR by re-thinking and reviving scientific research in the university where a big gap exists in conducting any research. In order for the professors to understand AR, they put themselves in a different mind-set and were able to re-think the meaning of scientific research; this kind of change is itself a goal of AR. The Syrian system is ready for broader changes, but does not have the tools to do so.

Self-evaluation and self-reflection were internal to the training program.[13] Throughout the program, each professor was asked to write and/or to present their assessment of the process either at the end of each workshop or by using the e-mail. The intent of the evaluation process and of recommendations and plans of action for both the participating professors and the MHE and SCS is to initiate a major shift in planning and facilitating scientific research. The results of the preliminary investigations of the professors speak to the effect that such a shift in attitude among the professors has taken place. The professors have changed their perception and attitudes about scientific research, realizing that without these changes they would not have been able to endure the tight time allocation, the relatively poor intellectual incentives, and the limited financial support and physical facilities in order to participate in this program.

It is important to realize that the ability of the participating professors to internalize the entire program was, no doubt, affected by the austere working conditions as summarized above. My recommendation to the Ministry, therefore, was that, given the fairly successful program and the existing human potential, those interested in improving scientific research within the Syrian higher education system need to further systemize scientific research, perhaps by using the AR module developed in collaboration with the professors of social sciences and the humanities at the four public universities.

This program confirmed that action research approaches are built on the affirmation that significant social change occurs only when the capacity for change is in the hands of those who are affected by the change, and who may benefit from it. The results suggest that educating in AR at the level of higher education was more effective when the professors saw their ability to conduct any scientific research as the priority. This self-evaluation process was the first achievement of the program, focusing on what facilitates or deters from doing scientific research, or what deters from doing social research for social change in the Syrian universities.

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[3] See "Hiwar fi Jami'at Al-Ba'ath Hawl Istratijiyat al-ta'lim al-'ali, (A Dialogue in Al-Ba'ath University about Higher Education Strategies)" Tishreen Daily, April 12, 2001, www.tishreen.info.

[4] See Greenwood (2004) and Barazangi (2004) for further discussion of issues of resistance to AR.

[5] It is interesting to note here that this associate dean and her work group had organized a special panel on the work of Ibn Khaldun (a pioneer Arab/Muslim sociologist, who combined philosophy, sociology, history and the art of historicity, genealogy, literary critique, government, and religious studies in his well-known *Muqaddiamah*, 1969) in March 2006 as part of a government-sponsored one-week cultural festival of the historic city of Aleppo.

[6] See United Nations Development Programme 2003: Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society (Abstract). Accessed November 15, 2003: http://www.undp.org/rbas/ahdr/english2003.html; and the UNDP 2002: Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating opportunities for future generations (Forward). Accessed December 28, 2002: http://www.rbas.undp.org/ahdr2.cfm?menu=10.

[7] All quotations, with the exception of few, are my translation from Arabic.

[8] This university periodical provides the main access to recent research for many professors.

[9] In December 2005, the Syrian President approved a reform law for the entire higher education sector.

[10] I drafted a "Letter of Intent" both in Arabic and English, and asked those 14 professors to sign it if they were interested in furthering their collaboration with me and with the SCS. It basically charts the conditions for collaborations and the responsibility of all parties involved.

[11] When a reporter of a government-sponsored newspaper approached me to report on the progress of the program (I had already granted two interviews to the same newspaper before), I reiterated the main goal of the seminar (i.e., to encage the professors with the university administrators and the scientific community about the results of their research) and, then, asked her to hear the professors speak for themselves. She did interview five of them.

[12] See Barazangi 2004 and Greenwood 2004 about a similar type of resentment to AR.

[13] See Barazangi 2006a and Barazangi et al., 2004, for further details of the evaluation model.