1 Understanding Action Research

In this chapter we outline the foundations of action research through describing its core tenets and illustrating how it has become a generic term for a wide array of related approaches.

What is action research?

In the words of Reason and Bradbury, 'action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview' (2001: 1). This working definition provides a flavour of the broad scope and intent of action research with the ultimate aim of 'the flourishing of the individual person and their communities'. Shani and Pasmore provide a more restricted definition:

> Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry. (Shani and Pasmore, 1985: 439)

Given the context of this book, where we expect readers to be working on action research projects in their own organizations, we are working more from Shani and Pasmore's definition than Reason and Bradbury's.

Several broad characteristics define action research:

- research *in* action, rather than research *about* action;
- a collaborative democratic partnership;

- concurrent with action;
- a sequence of events and an approach to problem solving.

We will discuss each in turn.

First, action research focuses on research *in* action, rather than research *about* action. The central idea is that AR uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organizational issues together with those who experience these issues directly. Action research works through a cyclical four-step process of consciously and deliberately: planning; taking action; evaluating the action; leading to further planning, and so on.

Second, AR is a collaborative, democratic partnership. Members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the cyclical process outlined above. Such participation contrasts with traditional research where members of the system are subjects or objects of the study. An important qualitative element of action research is how people are drawn into the processes of inquiry and action and how they participate and collaborate.

Third, AR is research concurrent with action. The goal is to make that action more effective while simultaneously building up a body of scientific knowledge.

Finally, AR is both a sequence of events and an approach to problem solving. As a sequence of events, it comprises iterative cycles of gathering data, feeding it back to those concerned, analysing the data, planning action, taking action and evaluating, leading to further data gathering and so on. As an approach to problem solving, it is an application of the scientific method of fact-finding and experimentation to practical problems requiring action solutions and involving the collaboration and co-operation of the action researchers and members of the organizational system. The desired outcomes of the action research approach are not just solutions to the immediate problems but are important learning from outcomes both intended and unintended, and a contribution to scientific knowledge and theory.

Research paradigms and action research

How is action research scientific? Many writers have articulated the ontological and epistemological foundations of action research and contrasted them with those of the scientific method associated with positivistic philosophy (Susman and Evered, 1978; Riordan, 1995; Eden and Huxham, 1996; Greenwood and Levin, 1998, Gummesson, 2000; Reason and Torbert, 2001). It is not our intention to retrace those arguments here but instead we will give

a brief general overview of the three main traditions, positivism, hermeneutics and critical realism (see Table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1 **RESEARCH PARADIGMS AND ACTION RESEARCH**

Philosophical foundations	Positivism	Hermeneutic and postmodernism	Critical realism and action research
Ontology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Objectivist
Epistemology	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Subjectivist
Theory	Generalizable	Particular	Particular
Reflexivity	Methodological	Hyper	Epistemic
Role of researcher	Distanced from data	Close to data	Close to data

The philosophy of science has produced useful principles relating to epistemology and ontology which include some basic assumptions that constitute the philosophical underpinnings of warranted knowledge or theory. This in turn enables us to understand science and differing forms of explanation. Epistemology (the grounds for knowledge) and ontology (the nature of the world) can be assessed along a fairly arbitrary continuum moving from an objectivist (realist) to a subjectivist (relativist) perspective. Researchers' epistemological and ontological perspectives legitimate their own distinctive way of doing research and determine what they consider as a valid, legitimate contribution to knowledge or theory irrespective of whether we called it development, confirmation, validation, creation, building or generation (Peter and Olsen, 1983). An objectivist view of epistemology accepts the possibility of a theory-neutral language, in other words it is possible to access the external world objectively. A subjectivist view denies the possibility of a theory-neutral language. An objectivist view of ontology assumes that social and natural reality have an independent existence prior to human cognition whereas a subjectivist ontology assumes that what we take as reality is an output of human cognitive process (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Different epistemological and ontological approaches encourage different kinds of reflexivity. Even though reflexivity is not a new concept to the social sciences its importance has only come to the fore in recent times (Bourdieu, 1990).

Reflexivity is the social sciences concept used to explore and deal with the relationship between the researcher and the object of research. Reflection means thinking about the conditions for what one is doing, investigating the way in which the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affects interaction with whatever is being researched, often in ways difficult to become conscious of (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

Systematic reflexivity is the constant analysis of one's own theoretical and methodological presuppositions which helps with retaining an awareness of the importance of other people's definitions and understandings of theirs (Lynch, 1999). Johnson and Duberley (2000) subdivide systematic reflexivity into two forms, epistemic and methodological. Epistemic reflexivity focuses on the researcher's belief system and is the process for analysing and challenging our meta-theoretical assumptions. Methodological reflexivity is concerned with the monitoring of our behavioural impact upon the research setting as a result of carrying out the research. This requires us to follow the research procedure and protocols identified and demanded by the different research traditions.

The dominant approach or paradigm in management and organizational studies has been positivism and its successors (explanation, hypothetico-deductive, multi-method eclecticism). These approaches are defined primarily by their view that an external reality exists and that an independent value-free researcher can examine this reality. In other words they adhere to an objectivist (realist) ontology and an objectivist epistemology. Positivists adopt a method-ological approach towards reflexivity and concentrate on improving methods and their application (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The aim of positivist sci-ence is the creation of generalizable knowledge or covering laws. In positivist science findings are validated by logic, measurement and the consistency achieved by the consistency of prediction and control. The positivist scientist's relationship to the setting is one of neutrality and detachment.

The hermeneutic tradition, the other main approach (sometimes referred to as phenomenology, constructivist, interpretivist, postmodern interpretivism rel-ativist approach), argues that there is no objective or single knowable external reality, and that the researcher is an integral part of the research process, not sep-arate from it. This distinction is based on the subject–object dichotomy. This ontological 'subjective versus objective' dimension concerns the assumptions social theories make about the nature of the social world. This approach follows a subjectivist (relativist) ontology and epistemology. Inquiry is inherently value-laden. Postmodernism tends to adopt a hyper-reflexivity which focuses on reflexive deconstruction of own practice. Hermeneutic inquiry is directed towards the development of particular or idiographic knowledge. Nothing can be measured without changing it and this insider close to the data perspective provides valid rich and deep data.

The third approach identified by Johnson and Duberley is critical realism incorporating pragmatic critical realism and aligns with our concept and under-standing of action research. This approach follows a subjectivist epistemology similar to the hermeneutic tradition but an objectivist ontology like the posi-tivists. This approach concentrates on epistemic reflexivity which looks at

exposing interests and enabling emancipation through self-reflexivity. Reflexivity is not a neutral process and is in itself socially and historically conditioned. If reflexivity is to facilitate change it needs to be guided by principles of democratic engagement and a commitment to change. Reflective knowledge has to do with normative states in social, economic and political realms. It concerns a vision of what ought to be, what is right and what is wrong and arises through the process of consciousness-raising and conscientization (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Action research focuses on knowledge in action. Accordingly, the knowledge created through action research is particular, situational and out of praxis. In action research the data are contextually embedded and interpreted. In action research, the basis for validation is the conscious and deliberate enactment of the action research cycle. The action researcher is immersed in the research setting.

Action research approaches are radical to the extent that they advocate replacement of existing forms of social organization. Action research challenges normal science in several action-oriented ways. Sharing the power of knowledge production with the researched subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policymakers. Action researchers work on the epistemological assumption that the purpose of academic research and discourse is not just to describe, understand and explain the world but also to change it (Reason and Torbert, 2001). The issue is not so much the form of the knowledge produced or the methodology employed to gather data/evidence but who decides the research agenda in the first place and who benefits directly from it.

In short, the contrast of roles is between that of detached observer in positivist science and of an actor and agent of change in action research (Evered and Louis, 1981). Weisbord (1988) explores the images of taking photographs and making films in relation to organization development. He describes taking photographs as freezing a moment in time and arranging key factors in a conceptual framework. No photograph takes in the whole of reality; it only takes in what is in the frame. Photographers decide what is to be in the frame and they manipulate the setting to include and exclude desirable and undesirable features. Making films is an engagement in patterns of activity and relationships by multiple actors who are moving and interacting over a period of time. It is increasingly common to find actors directing their own films. In these cases, actor-directors engage in their acting role in costume and then return to behind the camera in order to study the take, critique it and make decisions about proceeding to the next take. We find this image of making films and the action researcher as an actor-director pertinent and useful for thinking about doing action research. As Riordan expresses it, action research is:

> a kind of approach to studying social reality without separating (while distin-
> guishing) fact from value; they require a practitioner of science who is not only
> an engaged participant, but also incorporates the perspective of the critical
> and analytical observer, not as a validating instance but as integral to the
> practice. (1995: 10)

Readers undertaking an action research project through an academic disserta-
tion will engage in their own review of these philosophical issues. Suffice it to
say that action research as a scientific approach does not have to justify itself in
comparison to other approaches, but rather is evaluated within its own frame of
reference.

An integrative approach to research incorporates three voices and audi-
ences – first, second and third person (Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Reason
and Torbert, 2001). Traditionally, research has focused on third person –
researchers doing research on third persons and writing a report for other third
persons. In a more complete vision of research as presented by action research
and many other transformational inquiry approaches, authentic third-person
research integrates first- and second-person voices. First-person research is
typically characterized as the forms of inquiry and practice that one does on
one's own and so addresses the ability of the individual to foster an inquiring
approach to his or her own life, to act out of awareness and purposefully. First-
person research can take researchers 'upstream' where they inquire into their
basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy of life. It can also take
them 'downstream' where they inquire into their behaviour, ways of relating
and their action in the world. Second-person inquiry/practice addresses their
ability to inquire into and work with others on issues of mutual concern,
through face-to-face dialogue, conversation and joint action. Second person
poses an important challenge as to who is involved in the research and how. As
action research is integrally collaborative and democratic the quality of second-
person inquiry and action is central. Third-person inquiry/practice aims at
creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond the direct second-
person action. Third person is impersonal and is actualized through dissemination
by reporting, publishing and extrapolating from the concrete to the general. As
Reason and Torbert (2001) point out there are plenty of implicit examples of
first-, second- and third-person inquiry, but what is required now is explicit
integrating of all three persons with action and inquiry. The construct of
first-, second- and third-person inquiry is a development of Reason and
Marshall's popular notion of three audiences of research:

> All good research is <u>for me, for us</u>, and <u>for them</u>: it speaks to three audi-
> ences ... It is <u>for them</u> to the extent that it produces some kind of

generalizable ideas and outcomes . . . It is <u>for us</u> to the extent that it responds to concerns for our praxis, is relevant and timely . . . [for] those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. It is <u>for me</u> to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researcher's being-in-the-world. (Reason and Marshall, 1987: 112–13)

Foundations of action research

Action research has been traditionally defined as an approach to research which is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client which aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge. It has many origins and roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, one of the founding fathers of social psychology, in Paolo Freire's work on consciousness-raising, and in various schools of liberation thought, notably Marxist and feminist. We are building particularly on how action research developed largely from the work of Kurt Lewin and his associates, and involves a collaborative cyclical process of diagnosing a change situation or a problem, planning, gathering data, taking action, and then fact-finding about the results of that action in order to plan and take further action (Lewin, 1946, 1948; Dickens and Watkins, 1999). The key idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organizational issues together with those who experience these issues directly.

Argyris (1993) summarizes four core themes of Lewin's work. First, Lewin integrated theory with practice by framing social science as the study of problems of real life, and he connected all problems to theory. Second, he designed research by framing the whole, and then differentiating the parts. Third, he produced constructs which could be used to generalize and understand the individual case, particularly through the researcher as intervenor and his notion that one could only understand something when one tried to change it. Fourth, he was concerned with placing social science at the service of democracy, thereby changing the role of those being studied from subjects to clients so that help, if effective, could improve the quality of life and lead to more valid knowledge. Marrow, Lewin's biographer, states,

Theory was always an intrinsic part of Lewin's search for understanding, but theory often evolved and became refined as the data unfolded, rather than being systematically detailed in advance. Lewin was led by both data and theory, each feeding the other, each guiding the research process. (Marrow, 1969: 128)

Argyris and colleagues (1985: 8–9) summarize Lewin's concept of action research:

1 It involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.
2 Like social management more generally, it involves iterative cycles of iden-tifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating.
3 The intended change in an action research project typically involves reeducation, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and action that are currently well established in individuals and groups. A change intended by change agents is typically at the level of norms and values expressed in action. Effective re-education depends on participation by clients in diagnosis, fact finding and free choice to engage in new kinds of action.
4 It challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is con-gruent with the requirements of effective re-education.
5 It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social sci-ence and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed nor is the relation to practice to be lost.

After Lewin's untimely death in 1947, action research became integral to the growth of the theory and practice of organization development (Cunningham, 1993; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; French and Bell, 1999; Burke, 2002; Weisbord, 2004), and significant for organizational research (Eden and Huxham, 1996; Gummesson, 2000), such as commercial organizations (Pasmore, 2001; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002: Adler et al., 2004), education (Zeichner, 2001), community work (Stringer, 1999) and health and social care (Morrison and Lifford, 2001; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001), nursing (Waterman et al., 2001) and occupational therapy (Atwal, 2003).

Lippitt (1979) distinguishes three different meanings that have been denoted by the term action research which reflect different roles played by the researcher. First, diagnostic research is conducted concerning some ongoing aspect of an action process. In this form of research the researcher gathers the data and pre-sents it to those who are in a position to take some action. The research originates from the researcher's interests and is useful to the organization, partly as a pay-off for allowing access. In Lippitt's view this does not constitute action research. The second meaning of the term action research is connoted by a pro-cedure of collecting data from participants of a system and providing feedback about the findings of the data as an intervention to influence, presumably in a helpful way, the ongoing action process of the system. In this model the

researcher may be acting either as a data gatherer solely or in a helping role to the members of the system. The third meaning of action research is defined as a procedure in which the participants of a social system are involved in a data collection process about themselves and they utilize the data they have generated to review the facts about themselves in order to take some form of remedial or developmental action. In this model, the researcher and the researched are working in collaboration. In Lippitt's view this is the purest form of action research.

Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) criticize how action research has developed to be viewed as a form of problem solving. They challenge what they see as underlying assumptions about the nature of action research, which are based on utilitarian and technical views of organizations as problems to be solved. As an alternative, they propose appreciative inquiry as a form of action research which focuses on building on what is already successful, rather than what is deficient.

For Gummesson (2000: 16) action research is 'the most demanding and far-reaching method of doing case study research'. He integrates the characteristics of action research from several case studies and focuses on it from a management perspective.

1 *Action researchers take action*. Action researchers are not merely observing something happening; they are actively working at making it happen.

2 *Action research always involves two goals*: solve a problem and contribute to science. As we pointed out earlier action research is about research *in* action and does not postulate a distinction between theory and action. Hence the challenge for action researchers is to engage in both making the action happen and stand back from the action and reflect on it as it happens in order to contribute theory to the body of knowledge.

3 *Action research is interactive*. Action research requires cooperation between the researchers and the client personnel, and continuous adjustment to new information and new events. In action research, the members of the client system are co-researchers as the action researcher is working with them on their issue so that the issue may be resolved or improved for their system and a contribution be made to the body of knowledge. As action research is a series of unfolding and unpredictable events, the actors need to work together and be able to adapt to the contingencies of the unfolding story.

4 *Action research aims at developing holistic understanding* during a project and recognizing complexity. As organizations are dynamic socio-technical systems, action researchers need to have a broad view of how the system works and be able to move between formal structural and technical and

informal people subsystems. Working with organizational systems requires an ability to work with dynamic complexity, which describes how a system is complex, not because of a lot of detail (detail complexity) but because of multiple causes and effects over time (Senge, 1990).

5 *Action research is fundamentally about change*. Action research is applicable to the understanding, planning and implementation of change in groups, organizations and communities. As action research is fundamentally about change, knowledge of and skill in the dynamics of organizational change are necessary. We develop this point in Chapter 8.

6 *Action research requires an understanding of the ethical framework*, values and norms within which it is used in a particular context. In action research ethics involves authentic relationships between the action researcher and the members of the client system as to how they understand the process and take significant action. Values and norms that flow from such ethical principles typically focus on how the action researcher works with the members of the organization. We will develop this point in Chapter 6.

7 *Action research can include all types of data gathering methods*. Action research does not preclude the use of data gathering methods from traditional research. Qualitative and quantitative tools, such as interviews and surveys are commonly used. What is important in action research is that the planning and use of these tools be well thought out with the members of the organization and be clearly integrated into the action research process. We return to this point in Chapter 8.

8 *Action research requires a breadth of preunderstanding* of the corporate or organizational environment, the conditions of business or service delivery, the structure and dynamics of operating systems and the theoretical underpinnings of such systems. Preunderstanding refers to the knowl-edge the action researcher brings to the research project. Such a need for preunderstanding signals that an action research approach is inappropriate for researchers who, for example, think that all they have to do to develop grounded theory is just to go out into the field.

9 *Action research should be conducted in real time*, though retrospective action research is also acceptable. While action research is a live case study being written as it unfolds, it can also take the form of a traditional case study written in retrospect, when the written case is used as an interven-tion into the organization in the present. In such a situation the case performs the function of a 'learning history' and is used as an intervention to promote reflection and learning in the organization (Kleiner and Roth, 1997).

10   *The action research paradigm requires its own quality criteria.* Action research should *not* be judged by the criteria of positivist science, but rather within the criteria of its own terms.

Business consultancy language not withstanding, Gummesson's characteristics apply to the action researcher in any organization. The research project unfolds as the cycles of planning, data gathering, taking action, reviewing and further planning and action are enacted.

Shani and Pasmore (1985) present a complete theory of the action research process in terms of four factors:

1   *Context*: These factors set the context of the action research project. Individual goals may differ and impact the direction of the project, while shared goals enhance collaboration. Organizational characteristics, such as resources, history, formal and informal organizations and the degrees of congruence between them affect the readiness and capability for participating in action research. Environmental factors in the global and local economies provide the larger context in which action research takes place.
2   *Quality of relationships*: The quality of relationship between members and researchers is paramount. Hence the relationships need to be managed through trust, concern for other, equality of influence, common language.
3   *Quality of the action research process itself*: The quality of the action research process is grounded in the dual focus on both the inquiry process and the implementation process.
4   *Outcomes*: The dual outcomes of action research are some level of improvement and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of new knowledge from the inquiry.

Experiential paradigms of action research

The term action research is a generic one and is used to refer to a bewildering array of activities and methods. At its core, action research is a research approach which focuses on simultaneous action and research in a collaborative manner. Within this approach are multiple paradigms or methodologies, each of which has its own distinctive emphasis (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Adler et al., 2004). Some action research methodologies have developed from sociology and focus on how communities as socio-political systems enact social change. These approaches have a focus outside of the organizational context and tend to address structural emancipatory issues, relating to, for example, education, social

exclusion and power and control (Lynch, 1999; Fals-Borda, 2001). This tradition of action research is particularly associated with action research in the southern hemisphere. Other action research approaches, particularly in the northern hemisphere, have their origins in applied behavioural science and have developed in the organizational context (Coch and French, 1948; Foster, 1972; Schein, 1987; French and Bell, 1999; Coghlan and Coughlan, 2003; Adler et al., 2004). Parallel to this approach is one that focuses on relationships, both in the workplace and between social partners in regional development (Gustavsen, 1992, 2001; Eikeland and Finstrud, 1995; Toulmin and Gustavsen, 1996). The central process for building relationships is democratic dialogue. This book is addressed primarily to those working within organizational settings and as such is part of the northern hemisphere tradition of action research.

A significant feature of all action research is that the purpose of research is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the fund of knowledge in a field, or even to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge/theory and action so that each inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, and their communities (Reason and Torbert, 2001). Action research rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure–applied distinction that has traditionally characterized management and social research. These approaches incorporate a collaborative enactment of action research cycles whereby the intended research outcome is the construction of actionable knowledge.

In this chapter we will not elaborate on the nuances between the different action research approaches as they are well articulated elsewhere (Whyte, 1991; Elden and Chisholm, 1993; Brooks and Watkins, 1994; Raelin, 1997, 1999; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Bray et al., 2000; Adler et al., 2004). We are not focusing on differences or even instances of these differences, but rather the core values and processes that are central across each of these approaches.

Traditional action research

Action research in its traditional sense comes from the work of Kurt Lewin (1946, 1948) and involves a collaborative change management or problem-solving relationship between researcher and client aimed at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge. The researcher and client engage in collaborative cycles of planning, taking action and evaluating. This form of action research is central to the theory and practice of organization development (Cunningham, 1993; French and Bell, 1999; Coghlan and McAuliffe, 2003). It is this form of action research that provides the central theme of this book.

Participatory action research

Participatory action research (PAR) typically has a focus outside of the organizational context and involves egalitarian participation by a community to transform some aspects of its situation or structures. It focuses on concerns of power and powerlessness and how the powerless are excluded from decision making, and moves to empowering people to construct and use their own knowledge (Selener, 1997; Fals-Borda, 2001). Many of the liberation or emancipatory action research approaches are variations on PAR.

Action learning

Action learning is an approach to the development of people in organizations which takes the task as the vehicle for learning. It reverses the traditional learning process where one learns something first and then applies it. In action learning the starting point is the action. It is based on two principles. First, 'There can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning' (Revans, 1998: 83). Second, 'Those unable to change themselves cannot change what goes on around them' (Revans, 1998: 85). Its three objectives are outlined by Revans, the founder of action learning:

1   To make useful progress on the treatment of some real problems or opportunity.
2   To give nominated managers sufficient scope to learn for themselves in the company of others.
3   To encourage teachers and others in management development to help others learn with and from each other.

Action learning is formulated around Revans's learning formula, $L = P + Q$ (Revans, 1998). L stands for learning, P for programmed learning (i.e. current knowledge in use, already known, what is in books etc.) and Q for questioning insight. Revans (1982) describes three processes central to action learning:

1   A process of inquiry into the issue under consideration – its history, manifestation, what has prevented it from being resolved, what has previously been attempted. Revans calls this process System Alpha.
2   Action learning is science in progress through rigorous exploration of the resolution of the issue through action and reflection. He calls this System Beta.

3   Action learning is characterized by a quality of group interaction which
    enables individual critical reflection, and ultimately the learning. This is the
    essence of action learning and Revans calls it System Gamma.

These three processes emphasize how action learning involves engagement
with real issues, rather than with fabrications, is both scientifically rigorous in
confronting the issue and critically subjective through managers learning in
action. Participating managers take responsibility for and control of their own
learning and so there is minimal use of experts (Pedler, 1996; Revans, 1998;
Dilworth and Willis, 2003).

Action science

Action science is associated with the work of Chris Argyris (Argyris et al., 1985;
Friedman, 2001a; Argyris, 2004). Argyris places an emphasis on the cognitive
processes of individuals' 'theories-in-use', which he describes in terms of Model
I (strategies of control, self-protection, defensiveness and covering up embar-
rassment) and Model II (strategies eliciting valid information, free choice and
commitment). Attention to how individuals' theories-in-use create organiza-
tional defensiveness is an important approach to organizational learning
(Argyris, 1990, 1999; Argyris and Schon, 1996; Senge, 1990; Senge et al.,
1994).

Developmental action inquiry

Developmental action inquiry is associated with the work of Bill Torbert (1987,
1991, 1999, 2001; Fisher et al., 2000). Torbert defines action inquiry as 'a kind
of scientific inquiry that is conducted in everyday life . . . that deals primarily
with "primary" data encountered "on-line" in the midst of perception and
action' (1991: 220). Torbert develops the inquiry process by linking the ability
to engage in the rigour of action inquiry with stages of ego development. As
individuals advance through stages of ego development they may develop the
skills that confront them at those stages. As Torbert (1999) illustrates, the goal
orientation of the Achiever stage can evolve into the self-conscious responsive-
ness of the Strategist stage. In his view, it is in the latter stages of development
that individuals can engage in collaborative inquiry, whereby as individuals
they reflect on their behaviour-in-action, and their behaviour towards others is
such that it invites them to do likewise. Such behaviour has implications for the

role of leadership and the use of power in creating communities of inquiry (Torbert, 1987, 1989).

Cooperative inquiry

One of the forms that action research takes is cooperative inquiry (Reason, 1988, 1999; Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2001). Heron and Reason define cooperative inquiry:

> as involving two or more people researching a topic through their own expe-rience of it in order to:
>
> ● understand their world to make sense of their life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things.
> ● learn how to act to change things they might want to change and find out how to do things better. (Heron and Reason, 2001: 179)

Each person 'is a co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases' (Heron, 1996; 1). Reason (1999) set out the process of co-operative inquiry in the following stages.

1   The group talks about the group's interests and concerns, agrees on the focus of the inquiry, and develops together a set of questions or proposals its members wish to explore.
2   The group applies actions in the everyday work of the members, who ini-tiate the actions and observe and record the outcomes of their own and each other's behaviour.
3   The group members as co-researchers become fully immersed in their experience. They may deepen into the experience or they may be led away from the original ideas and proposals into new fields, unpredicted action and creative insights.
4   After an agreed period engaged in phases two and three, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original questions in the light of their experi-ence.

Clinical inquiry

In writing about an organization development approach to organizational research, Schein (1987, 2001) introduces the notion of the 'clinical' approach to research. For Schein, clinical refers to those trained helpers (such as clinical and

counselling psychologists, social workers, organization development consul-
tants) who work professionally with human systems. These trained helpers act
as organizational clinicians in that they: (a) emphasize in-depth observation of
learning and change processes; (b) emphasize the effects of interventions; (c)
operate from models of what it is to function as a healthy system and focus on
pathologies, puzzles and anomalies which illustrate deviations from healthy
functioning; (d) build theory and empirical knowledge through developing
concepts which capture the real dynamics of systems (Schein, 1997).

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry has emerged from the work of Cooperrider, and aims at
large system change through an appreciative focus on what already works in a
system, rather than a focus on what is deficient (Cooperrider et al., 2000,
2003; Golembiewski, 1998; Ludema et al., 2001, 2003). It is built around four
phases:

1 *Discovery*: appreciating the best of 'what is'.
2 *Dream*: envisioning 'what could be'.
3 *Design*: co-constructing 'what should be'.
4 *Destiny*: sustaining 'what will be'.

Appreciative inquiry takes a counter view to clinical inquiry through its focus
on appreciation rather than pathologies and problems.

Learning history

A learning history is a document composed by participants in a change effort,
with the help of external consultants who act as 'learning historians' (Kleiner
and Roth, 1997, 2000; Roth and Kleiner, 1998, 2000). It presents the experi-
ences and understandings in the words of those who have gone through and/or
been affected by the change in order to help the organization move forward.
The learning history is an action research process by being an intervention into
the organization. This happens when the action research documentation is
made available to organizational stakeholders as 'a written narrative of a com-
pany's recent set of critical episodes' (Kleiner and Roth, 1997: 173) with the
purpose of facilitating learning. Kleiner and Roth (1997) present a framework
for how this might be done. The narrative is read by significant stakeholders

who contribute to the story from their perspective in a special right-hand column on the page. Those social scientists and 'learning historians' who study the narrative use a left-hand column for their reflection and analysis as the basis for further discussion in the organization.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice refers to how individuals engage in critical reflection on their own action. It is associated with the work of Schon (1983, 1987, 1991; Jarvis, 1999; Raelin, 2000). Reflective practice may be a specific dimension of action research, as indeed we will argue in the next chapter, but by and large published accounts of reflective practice focus only on the individual and generally do not consider any organizational dynamics or outcomes related to the individual's action.

Schon (1983) reflects on four ways that reflective practitioners might engage in 'reflective research'

1 *Frame analysis*: when practitioners become aware of their 'frames' and consider alternatives.
2 *Repertoire building research*: accumulating and describing examples of reflection in action.
3 *Research on fundamental methods of inquiry and overarching theories*: by examining episodes of practice in an action science.
4 *Research on the process of reflection in action*: studying processes whereby practitioners learn to reflect in action.

Evaluative inquiry

Closely related to action research is the process of evaluative inquiry which is a reformulation of traditional evaluation practices through an emphasis on using the process of inquiry to generate organizational learning (Preskill and Torres, 1999). Many of the processes within action research, such as collaborative inquiry, reflection, joint planning and taking action are utilized as interventions to shape how projects are evaluated in order to stimulate organizational learning.

For the neophyte reader these multiple methodologies are confusing. In our view, it is important to emphasize that these different methodologies are not mutually exclusive. They are sets of general principles and devices which can be

adapted to different research issues and contexts. Each has its own emphasis and can be appropriately used in conjunction with other approaches. What is important is that you, as the action researcher, be helped to seek the method appropriate to your inquiry and situation.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have outlined the foundations of action research as research that is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client which aims at both solving a problem and generating new knowledge. Irrespective of methodological or epistemological perspective, how to distinguish good research from bad is the key question. Generally speaking, good research is purposeful, its goals are clearly defined and significant, the methodological procedures defensible, evidence is systematically analysed and the 'objectivity' of the researcher clearly evident.

Action research is an approach to research that works at gathering data in the field by non-traditional methods with the concerns of practitioners who want to improve organizations and communities. Regretfully, it has often become a glib term for involving clients in research and has lost its role as a powerful conceptual tool for uncovering truth on which action can be taken. Action research is a form of science, which differs from the model of experimental physics, but is genuinely scientific in its emphasis on careful observation and study of the effects of behaviour on human systems as their members manage change. Action research and the action research cycle is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

2

Enacting the Action Research Cycle

In its original Lewinian and simplest form, the action research cycle comprises a pre-step and three core activities: planning, action and fact finding (Lewin, 1946). The pre-step involves naming the general objective. Planning comprises having an overall plan and a decision regarding what the first step to take is. Action involves taking that first step, and fact finding involves evaluating the first step, seeing what was learned and creating the basis for correcting the next step. So there is a continuing 'spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (Lewin, 1946: 146).

These core steps have been articulated differently by different authors, from Stringer's (1999) simple *look, think, act*, to French and Bell's (1999) complex action research organization development framework involving iterative cycles of joint action planning, feedback, further data gathering, diagnosis and action of an external OD consultant with a client system.

The action research cycle

For the context of doing action research in your own organization we are presenting an action research cycle comprising a pre-step, context/purpose and four basic steps, diagnosing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action (see Figure 2.1). The exploration of the action research cycle needs to be understood in terms of the four factors of action research presented in Chapter 1: context, quality of relationships, quality of the action research process itself and the outcomes.

Pre-step: context and purpose

The action research cycle unfolds in real time and begins with an understanding of the context of the project. Why is this project necessary or desirable? In
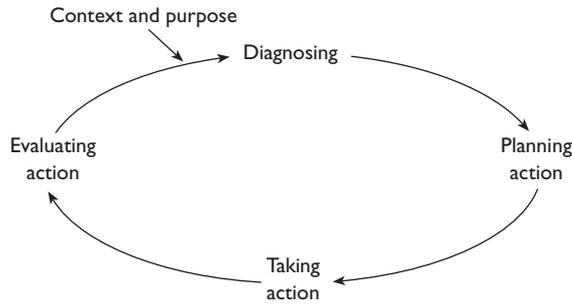
FIGURE 2.1 **THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE**

terms of assessing the external context, what are the economic, political and social forces driving change? In terms of internal forces, what are the cultural and structural forces driving change? The assessment of these forces identifies their source, their potency and the nature of the demands they make on the system. Included also is the assessment of the degree of choice in how the system responds to the forces for change. Once a sense of the need or desirability for the project is identified, then the most useful focus for attention is the definition of a desired future state. The process of defining the desired future state is critical as it sets the boundaries for the purpose of the project and helps provide focus and energy for the later stages. The issues are elaborated in Chapter 8.

Another critical consideration in this pre-step is the establishment of collaborative relationships with those who have ownership or need to have ownership of the above questions. A central second-person task in this regard is to develop the groups or groups with which you will be working on the project.

Main Steps

Diagnosing

Diagnosing involves naming what the issues are, however provisionally, as a working theme, on the basis of which action will be planned and taken. As diagnosis involves the articulation of the theoretical foundations of action, it needs to be done carefully and thoroughly. While the diagnosis may change in later iterations of the action research cycle, any changes in diagnosis need to be recorded and articulated clearly, showing how events have led to alternative

diagnosis and showing the evidence and rationale for the new diagnosis on which further action is based. It is important that the diagnosing step be a collaborative venture, that is, that you as the action researcher engage relevant others in the process of diagnosis and not be the expert who does the diagnosis apart from others. In Chapter 7 we focus on how a project may be framed and in Chapter 10 we outline some guidelines for using diagnostic frameworks.

Planning action

Planning action follows from the analysis of the context and purpose of the project, the framing of the issue and the diagnosis, and is consistent with them. It may be that this action planning focuses on a first step or a series of first steps. In Chapter 8 we will describe how you implement the action research project. Again we emphasize the importance of collaboration in planning action.

Taking action

Then the plans are implemented and interventions are made.

Evaluating action

The outcomes of the action, both intended and unintended, are examined with a view to seeing:

- if the original diagnosis was correct;
- if the action taken was correct;
- if the action was taken in an appropriate manner;
- what feeds into the next cycle of diagnosis, planning and action.

So the cycle continues (see Figure 2.2).

In any action research project there are multiple action research cycles operating concurrently. These cycles typically have different time spans. The image of a clock captures this usefully (see Figure 2.3). The hour hand, which takes twelve hours to complete its cycle, may represent the project as a whole which may take several years to complete its cycle. The minute hand, which takes an hour to complete its cycle, may represent phases or particular sections of the project. The second hand, which completes its cycle in a minute, may represent
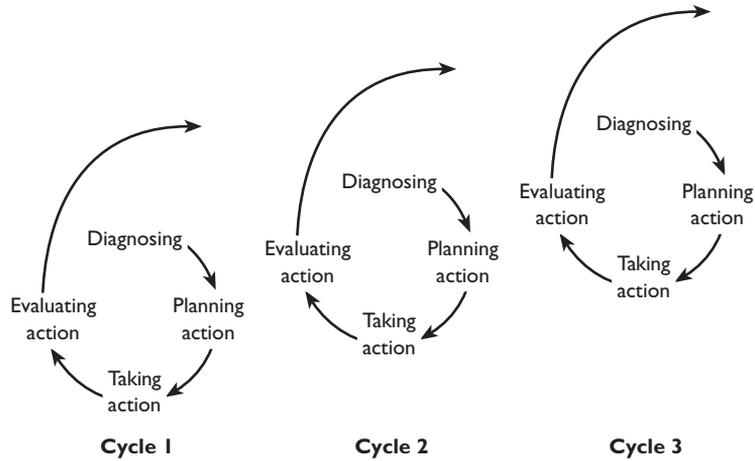
FIGURE 2.2 **SPIRAL OF ACTION RESEARCH CYCLES**

specific actions within the project, such as a specific meeting or interview. As in the clock, where the revolutions of the three hands are concurrent and where the revolutions of the second hand enable the revolutions of the minute hand and the revolutions of the second and minute hands enable the completion of the hour hand, the short-term action research cycles contribute to the medium-term cycles which contribute to the longer-term cycle.
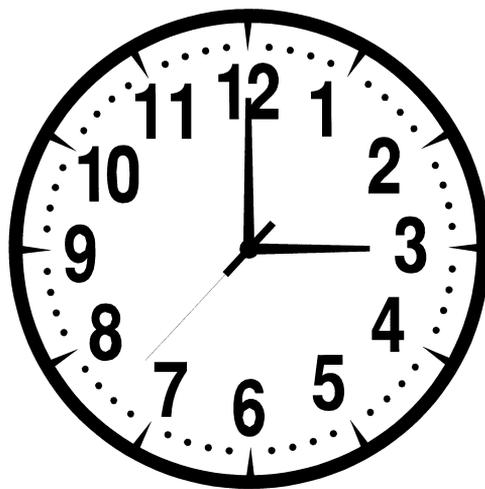

FIGURE 2.3 **CONCURRENT CYCLES OF ACTION RESEARCH**

While the action research cycle expresses the core process of integrating action and theory it is important to keep it in perspective. For instance, Heron (1996) describes two approaches to the use of the cycle. He contrasts one approach, *Apollonian* whereby the cycles are enacted in a rational, linear, systematic manner with *Dionysian*, an approach where there is an imaginative, expressive, tacit approach to integrating reflection and action. He cautions against being rigid in adapting the action research cycle formally and so denying spontaneity and creativity. It is also important not to get too preoccupied in the cycles at the expense of the quality of participation.

Meta learning

In any action research project there are two action research cycles operating in parallel. One is the cycle we have just described of diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating in relation to the project. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) call this the 'core' action research cycle. The second is a reflection cycle which is an action research cycle about the action research cycle. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry call this the 'thesis' action research cycle. In other words, at the same time as you are engaging in the project or core action research cycles, you need to be diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating about how the action research project itself is going and what you are learning. You need to be continually inquiring into each of the four main steps, asking how these steps are being conducted and how they are consistent with each other and, so, shaping how the subsequent steps are conducted. As Chris Argyris (2003) argues in making the same point, this inquiry into the steps of the cycles themselves is central to the development of actionable knowledge. It is the dynamic of this reflection on reflection that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle and enables action research to be more than everyday problem solving. Hence it is learning about learning, in other word, meta learning.

Mezirow (1991) identifies three forms of reflection: content, process and premise. These are useful categories. *Content* reflection is where you think about the issues, what is happening and so on. *Process* reflection is where you think about strategies, procedures and how things are being done. *Premise* reflection is where you critique underlying assumptions and perspectives. All three forms of reflection are critical.

When content, process and premise reflections are applied to the action research cycle, they form the meta cycle of inquiry (see Figure 2.4). The *content* of what is diagnosed, planned, acted on and evaluated is studied and evaluated. The *process* of how diagnosis is undertaken, how action planning
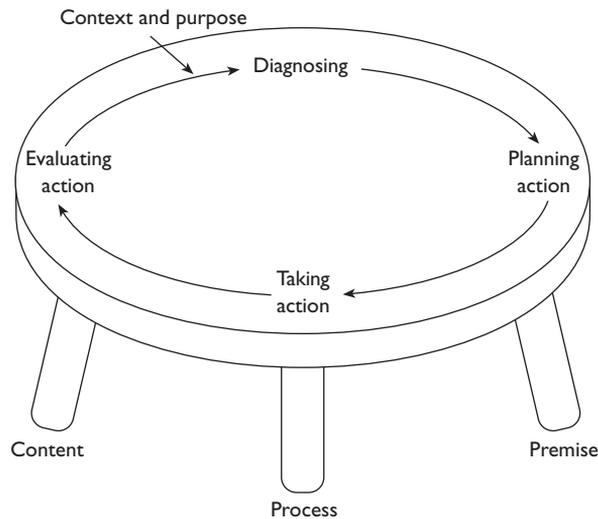
FIGURE 2.4 **META CYCLE OF INQUIRY**

flows from that diagnosis and is conducted, how actions follow and are an implementation of the stated plans and how evaluation is conducted are critical foci for inquiry. There is also *premise* reflection, which is inquiry into the unstated, and often non-conscious, underlying assumptions which govern attitudes and behaviour. For instance, the culture of the organization or subculture of the group working on the project has a powerful impact on how issues are viewed and discussed, without members being aware of them (Schein, 1992, 1996a, 1999b).

If you are writing a dissertation, the meta cycle is the focus of your dissertation. Remember, the action research project and your dissertation are not identical. They are integrally interlinked, but they are not the same. The project on which you are working may go ahead irrespective of whether or not you are writing a dissertation. Your dissertation is an inquiry into the project, hence you need to describe both cycles in a way that demonstrates the quality of rigour of your inquiry.

Mezirow's forms of reflection parallel the four territories of experience commonly used in action research (Fisher et al., 2000; Reason and Torbert, 2001; Torbert, 2001). These four territories operate at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels:

1   *Intentions*: purpose, goals, aims and vision.
2   *Planning*: plans, strategy, tactics, schemes.

3   *Action*: implementation, performance.
4   *Outcomes*: results, outcomes, consequences and effects.

Action research aims to develop awareness, understanding and skills across all these territories. You try to understand your intentions, to develop appropriate plans and strategies, to be skilled at carrying them out, to reflect on how well you have carried out the plans, and to evaluate their results. You can also inquire about the connections between these phases. You might, for example, begin with the outcomes, and explore how your actions caused these outcomes. Or you may take the inquiry further, and look at how your intentions and plans shaped your actions.

The activities of the meta cycle are not confined to your first-person practice as the individual action researcher. To add another layer of complexity to the learning cycle, the second-person practice with the groups and teams engaged in the action research cycles also attends to the steps of content, process and premise reflection.

Attending to the action research cycle and to the meta cycle may involve more than simply attending to behaviour. You may draw from techniques in the qualitative research approaches through how you formulate the issue, collect and analyse data and report results (Sagor 1992). Techniques from grounded theory approaches may be useful once the core compatibilities and incompatibilities between the two approaches are recognized (Baskerville and Pries-Heje, 1999).

Quality and rigour in action research

The action research paradigm requires its own quality criteria. Action research should *not* be judged by the criteria of positivist science, but rather within the criteria of its own terms. Reason and Bradbury (2001) point to what they consider to be choice points and questions for quality in action research:

1   Is the action research explicit in developing a praxis of relational participation? In other words how well does the action research reflect the cooperation between the action researcher and the members of the organization?
2   Is action research guided by a reflexive concern for practical outcomes? Is the action project governed by constant and iterative reflection as part of the process of organizational change or improvement?
3   Does action research include a plurality of knowing which ensures

conceptual-theoretical integrity, extends our ways of knowing and has a methodological appropriateness? Action research is inclusive of practical, propositional, presentational and experiential knowing and so as a methodology is appropriate to furthering knowledge on different levels.

4 Does action research engage in significant work? The significance of the project is an important quality in action research.

5 Does the action research result in new and enduring infrastructures? In other words, does sustainable change come out of the project?

Reason (2003) argues that as an action researcher you need to be aware of these choices and make them clear and transparent to yourself and to those with whom you are engaging in inquiry and to those to whom you present your research in writing or presentations. The editorial guidelines for the journal *Action Research* invite potential contributors to address these dimensions explicitly in submitting their work to the journal.

Rigour in action research refers to how data are generated, gathered, explored and evaluated, how events are questioned and interpreted through multiple action research cycles. In other words, as the action researcher, you need to show:

1 How you engaged in the steps of multiple and repetitious action research cycles (how diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating were done), and how these were recorded to reflect that they are a true representation of what was studied.

2 How you challenged and tested your own assumptions and interpretations of what was happening continuously through the project, by means of content, process and premise reflection, so that your familiarity with and closeness to the issues are exposed to critique.

3 How you accessed different views of what was happening which probably produced both confirming and contradictory interpretations.

4 How your interpretations and diagnoses are grounded in scholarly theory, rigorously applied, and how project outcomes are challenged, supported or disconfirmed in terms of the theories underpinning those interpretations and diagnoses.

The value in action research is not whether the change process was successful or not, but rather that the exploration of the data – that is how a particular change was managed – provides useful and interesting theory which may contribute to learning on the subject of change management.

What does a good action research project look like? Eden and Huxham

(1996) provide an extensive list of the fifteen characteristics of good action research. The foundational characteristics reflect the intentionality of the researcher to change an organization, that the project has some implications beyond those involved directly in it and that the project has an explicit aim to elaborate or develop theory as well as be useful to the organization. Theory must inform the design and development of the actions. Eden and Huxham place great emphasis on the enactment of the action research cycles, in which systematic method and orderliness is required in reflecting on the outcomes of each cycle and the design of the subsequent cycles.

In our view a good action research project contains three main elements: a good story; rigorous reflection on that story; and an extrapolation of usable knowledge or theory from the reflection on the story. These can be put in terms of three questions: What happened? How you do make sense of what happened? So what?

What happened?

As action research is about real time change, its core is the story of what takes place. The action research cycle of the general objective pre-step, and the three main steps of planning, action and fact finding describe how the project is conceived, what is intended, the cycles of action and the outcomes, both intended and unintended. The story must be presented in a factual and neutral manner, that is to say, as if it had been recorded on camera, and so that all the actors could agree on what had taken place. In short, the story is based on directly observable behaviour. Therefore, you need to be able to present evidence to support your narrative. Recorded data in journals and organizational documentation are important supporting evidence.

Accordingly, it is critical that fact be clearly distinguished from value, that the basic story does not contain the author's inferences or interpretations, or at least, not without such inferences or interpretations being explicitly identified as such. For instance, if an action research story contains an assertion that a certain group was out to wreck the project, the narrative would need to be clear that there was evidence that group was trying to wreck the project, rather than it being an inference of the researcher or any party who saw itself as victim of that group's action. We explore the role of making inferences in Chapter 3.

How you do make sense of what happened?

The critical process with respect to articulating your sense-making is making your tacit knowledge explicit. This involves not only providing an analysis of what you think is going on in the story, but also of how you are making sense of it as the story unfolds (Weick, 1995). In other words, sense-making is not only a retrospective process, but is also a process which is concurrent with the story, and in terms of the action research cycle actually shapes the story. Hence the image we used in Chapter 1 of the action researcher as actor-director. As you report assumptions which you held as the story progressed, you need to show how you tested them, especially if these assumptions were privately held. In terms of our example above, the researcher needs to test whether or not the group, which he thinks is out to wreck the project, actually intends that.

So what?

The third issue in action research is how the action research project is contributing theory or usable knowledge. As action research is context bound in a particular setting and set of events it needs to have some interest and relevance to the uninvolved reader, the third-person readership. Hence, the question 'so what?' is a pertinent and challenging question or as Friedman (2001a: 168) put it, 'if . . . then . . .'.

Conclusions

In summary, enacting the action research cycle involves not only the pre-step of articulating the context and purpose of the project, and the main steps of diagnosing, planning action, taking action and evaluating, but also reflecting on content, process and premise issues in how the action research cycles are undertaken. Both the action research and meta learning are undertaken by individuals, teams, between teams in the interdepartmental groups and between organizations. The rigour of your inquiry is demonstrated by how you expose these activities to critique and how your conclusions are supported by your development of theory or usable knowledge. We will now turn to how you as the action researcher can engage in learning in action.

1 Select an issue/problem that you have worked on in your team (or are working on).

2 What is the *context* of this issue? Why is it important? What are the stakes involved?

3 Describe how the issue was *diagnosed*. How did you decide that an intervention was needed or wanted/what was wrong, what the causes were? How did you deal with different diagnoses in the team?

4 What action was *planned*?

5 What happened when the action was *implemented*? What were the outcomes, both intended and unintended?

6 How did the team *review* the outcomes?

7 What was then diagnosed, planned, implemented etc.?

8 What is the *meta learning* from this exercise?

(a) As you look back on this, what strikes you about the *content* of the issue? Was the diagnosis correct? Had you named the right issue? What have you learned about this issue in your business/organization?

(b) What strikes you about *process*? How did the team work on the issue? What have you learned about how to plan, take action and evaluate?

(c) Was there any challenge to existing *premises* of how you thought about things, anything in the event that challenged the team to ask different questions, see the issue in terms of a different category of issue/problem, and so on?

Exercise 2.1
Enacting the action research cycles **(from Figure 2.1)**