CHAPTER
10
ACTION RESEARCH

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Key concepts

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Action research directly addresses the problem of the division between theory and practice. Rather than research being a linear process of producing knowledge which is later applied to practice settings, action research integrates the development of practice with the construction of research knowledge in a cyclical process. Instead of being research on a social setting and the people within it, it is research from inside that setting carried out either by the participants themselves or researchers working in collaboration with them. It has an immediate impact since it is an integral part of day-to-day work.

The earliest action research took place in the 1940s and 1950s, led by Lewin (1988), a psychologist refugee from Germany, who worked with community groups in the USA to resolve social problems such as prejudice; Trist, influenced by Lewin, worked in a similar way at the Tavistock Institute in London, focusing during the 1950s on experimental work in organizations to help them address their practical problems (see Pasmore, 2001). Lewin’s theory of action research divides the work into distinct stages within a series of cycles, starting with ‘reconnaissance’ and moving on to the collection of data, analysis and the development of ‘hypotheses’ to inform action. This then leads into the second cycle in which the hypotheses are tested in practice and the changes evaluated. The cyclical process of action research does not come to a natural conclusion, although at some point it is necessary to bring it to a close and publish the outcomes in some form.

In the USA, action research flowered briefly in education during the 1950s, but then attracted criticism from established researchers and declined. In the UK, it first became important in education as a result of Stenhouse’s Humanities Project and Elliott’s Ford Teaching Project during the 1970s (Elliott, 2001; Stenhouse, 1975). These projects were concerned with curriculum development, the former with developing innovative ways of teaching moral issues and the latter with reform in the teaching of science using ‘discovery learning’ methods. Stenhouse saw research as a necessary component of the work of every teacher and his definition of curriculum as a set of processes and interactions rather than a specification of subject content led to his belief that curriculum development was an impossibility without the involvement of teachers-as-researchers. In Australia, Kemmis, Robin McTaggart and colleagues established a significant base of action research at Deakin University (Carr and Kemmis, 1983). In Austria, through the work of Peter Posch and colleagues at the University of Klagenfurt, action research has made a significant impact on government policy for education (Altrichter, 2001). Since the mid-1980s there has been a resurgence of interest in action research in the USA. Of particular importance has been the development of a sustained tradition of teacher research focused on improving learning and teaching (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Zeichner, 2003), and more recently a tradition of self-study by teacher educators (Feldman, 2003). Another important strand has been the development of participatory action research (PAR) in organizational settings and the work of non-governmental organizations (Whitby, 1991). Emanating from South America, a different tradition of PAR has been influenced by the work of Paulo Freire. Starting out as a grassroots movement carrying out small-scale
Some see action research as being carried out by practitioners – whether in a professional group or university – to understand and improve their own practice. This tradition places importance on an outside facilitator who has expertise in supporting the practitioner-researchers. The relationship between the facilitator and ‘insiders’, such as nurses, social workers or teachers, is crucially important but it raises ethical issues related to their differential power. Sometimes the whole research process (identification of the problem, data collection and analysis, writing up and presentation at conferences and in publications) is carried out by insiders. The facilitators’ research focus is ‘second order’, concerned with improving their own practice as facilitators rather than the ‘first-order’ issues of practice. Another approach is for the action research to be led by a participant who comes into the practice situation from outside and negotiates the boundaries and parameters of the study with the participants, involving them as co-researchers without expecting them to undertake substantial amounts of additional work. The ‘outsider’ may be a professional who has become a graduate-student or a university-based researcher working on a funded project. Again, there will be imbalances of power and control so that the working relationship will need to be carefully negotiated. In all cases it may be useful to develop an agreed code of practice to ensure that ethical issues are discussed and addressed in advance.

There is a wide range of different approaches to action research. Noffke (1997) groups these within three dimensions: the professional, the personal and the political. The first focuses on improving what is offered to clients in professional settings, the second is concerned with social action to combat oppression. The third, the personal, not necessarily separated from either of the others, is concerned with factors such as developing ‘greater self-knowledge’ and ‘a deeper understanding of one’s own practice’. Noffke presents these categories as being of equal status, whereas Grundy’s (1982) earlier categorization suggests a hierarchy of status: the ‘technical’, the ‘practical’ and the ‘critical’. Based on the three kinds of knowledge in Aristotle’s *Ethica*, the technical focuses upon making a better product (for example more efficient and effective practice), the practical focuses upon developing the ‘practical judgement’ of the participant-researcher grounded in experience and self-reflection, and the critical leads to ‘emancipatory’ action research. The latter, which is characterized as ‘more powerful’ than the other two, involves group reflection and action to ‘emancipate’ the participants in the action from the dictates of compulsions of tradition, precedent, habit, coercion, as well as from self-deception. Grundy, like Kemmis, with whom she worked closely at Deakin University, grounded her conceptualization of action research in the critical theory of Habermas. More recently, Kemmis (2001) has reconceptualized the relationship between action research and critical theory in the light of ‘attacks on modernist theory from postmodernists and poststructuralists’. Drawing on the later work of Habermas, he reaffirms his belief in the importance of theory, and in particular critical theory, as a resource for conceptualizing action research.

Including the work already cited, a considerable body of writing has supported the development of action research, theorizing its similarities to, and differences from, other forms of research, and exploring the special value of generating theories as an integral part of development work in social settings. Much of this has focused upon the nature of practitioner knowledge and the special contribution it makes to research (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Elliott, 1994; Winter, 1998). Action research is closely linked by many writers with the concept of ‘reflective practice’ which has its roots in the work of Dewey (1933) who saw one kind of reflection as leading to the testing of hypotheses in action. In the UK and Austria the work of Schön (1983) has been influential in developing concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action as core attributes of expert professional practice. While it is true that action researchers necessarily engage in reflective practice, it is not true conversely that all reflective practitioners are action researchers. Crucially, action research involves a process of the collection and analysis of data that provides the practitioner with some objectivity and distance, looking at his or her own practice from another point of view, sometimes through bringing to bear more than one kind of data in a process of triangulation. By comparison with action learning where the emphasis is on groups supporting reflection based on the perceptions and memories of individuals, action research is based on consideration of data collected during practice, freeing interpretation from some of the constraints of memory and individual perceptions.
Action research is always rooted in the values of the participants. Somekh (1995) points out that its close links with the values of practice tend to mean that action research methodology adapts and develops in rather different ways within different social groups. Action research among nurses, for example, is strongly influenced by the need to establish credibility alongside the research of the medical profession so it tends to conform rather more to standards of traditional research rigour. In the UK, much action research in education has focused on the professional development of teachers and teacher educators (Dadds, 1995; O’Hanlon, 2001). In the USA, an important strand of participatory action research, originating in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, has contributed significantly to social action to promote social justice. Noffke (1997) opens with a quotation from Martin Luther King inviting researchers to ‘make society’s problems your laboratory’. She points to the key role played by writers such as DuBois (1973) and Horton (1990) in building this tradition. A particularly interesting recent example is the work of Hinsdale et al. (1995) who addressed the need for impoverished communities to identify their own resources for economic, educational and social redevelopment. Similarly, action research in South Africa, with its roots in the struggle against oppression in the time of apartheid, was often overtly political with a strong emphasis on issues of social justice (Walker, 1998). For writers working in a feminist tradition, such as Griffiths in the UK (1998) and Berge and Ve in Sweden (2000), social justice concerns have become paramount within a holistic process of inquiry and personal–professional development.

Implications for research design

It will already be clear from the account of Lewin’s traditional model above that action research frequently does not start with a research question. The driving force will be an impetus for change/innovation through deepening the participants’ understanding of social processes and developing strategies to bring about improvement. There will be a focus on some aspect of the social setting in which the work will take place, but the starting point may be something rather vague, such as a feeling of dissatisfaction without being sure of the reason, or a desire to understand some aspect of activity more deeply. There can be multiple starting points and there is unlikely to be an orderly progress through Lewin’s cyclical stages. Many writers have developed variants of Lewin’s model, for example McNiff (1988) adds small spirals of sub-activity breaking away from the main cycles. Altrichter et al. (1993) offer a four-step process of ‘finding a starting point’, ‘clarifying the situation’, developing action strategies/putting them into practice’ and ‘making teachers’ knowledge public’, in which the two middle steps are repeated as many times as necessary before moving to publication. However, the main point to remember is that models are only intended as rough planning tools, not exact representations of a process.

At the start it will be necessary to make some broad decisions. First, who will be involved? This will depend on whether the action research will be a study of one individual’s practice in a clearly defined setting such as a hospital ward, or a study of organizational change, for example in a school or hospital. In either case, a lot will depend on who is prepared to volunteer. A partner prepared to act as an observer will be invaluable in providing a different point of view and enabling triangulation of data. Participatory action research may have the aim of drawing more and more people into the process as the work progresses. In practice, this approach is likely to lead to the initiator losing some control over the direction of the project and it is important to be prepared for this or it may create considerable stress. Collaboration is never easy, so ethical issues need to be clearly identified and working principles agreed in advance to safe-guard the interests of all. As in all research, analysis of the data is the most difficult as well as the most interesting aspect of the work, but in action research it is an ongoing process which is integral with reflection during data collection. The development of action strategies and their implementation, based on the findings of the initial stage of the research, needs to be followed by further data collection to evaluate them, as the validation of action research outcomes involves testing them out as the basis for new actions to see if the expected improvement results.

Stories from the Field

Susan Noffke

Action research can begin in multiple settings, with multiple levels of participants. These ‘stories from the field’ are representations of how one action research
issue, parent involvement in the education of school children, can emerge from differing perspectives which, in turn, affect the process as well as the outcomes of the research. Yet in each story, the process of research is cyclical and focused both on producing new knowledge and on creating actions which will affect directly the social situation in which the issue emerges. It is temporal, as well as cumulative.

This series of small ‘stories’ is built from actual experiences. It also embodies plans for future action research projects. Theory plays a role, both ‘academic’ and those theories generated from the hopes and dreams of those most closely connected to practice. Change and thereby improvement in the immediate social situation is a goal, alongside the generation of better understanding of the social context – hence, action and research.

The teachers’ story

Many conceptions of action research focus initially on an individual teacher’s concerns, but then move on to collaborative projects:

I wonder about some of my students who are not doing as well as they could. If parents could be more ‘partners’ in the educational process, these children could do so much better in school.

After dialogue between colleagues and with administration, and a search of some of the relevant literature, the group devises a survey to gather information on both parent and teacher views on the issue of participation. While the survey results reveal much in terms of teacher attitudes, the parent response rate is small, involving primarily parents who are already involved in school activities. For some teachers, this response ‘proves’ their belief that ‘these parents just don’t care’. For others, who know parents and community members outside the school setting, that clearly is not the case. It makes no common sense for parents not to want their children to do well in school.

In the next cycle they design a focus group protocol, make use of their personal contacts and invite parents to discussions at local community sites at times when parents would be likely to be able to attend. Childcare is provided as well as refreshments. This time there is wide participation. The field notes taken were analysed and the patterns that emerged provided a basis for staff development, but the results were also shared with other schools in the area.

An administrator’s story

A school administrator has a parallel concern:

The school staff is highly qualified, and very successful with many of the students, especially those who come from backgrounds similar to their own. Yet they constantly talk about parents and children in ways that I feel are a reflection of their lack of understanding of the local community culture. They seek to explain gaps and weaknesses and not find strengths on which to build.

Together with the school advisory committee, which includes teachers, paraprofessionals, parents and other local community members as well as participants from a local university teacher education programme, they brainstorm ways to bring the various segments of the staff and community closer together. They decide to make ‘community’ a theme for project work for the year. Each grade level team designs inquiry activities that will provide opportunities for families and community members to share stories and local history. As the work emerges, the school staff begins to see parents and children in a new light, especially through collecting information over time (interviews, student work, parent comments, attendance and achievement records) and using it as a focal point for team discussions of learning plans.

A parent and community story

A similar goal looks somewhat different from a parent and community perspective:

I know that our son could be doing better at school, but I have a hard time finding out how to help. The regular progress reports and parent–teacher conferences are helpful, but I often feel that as long as my child isn’t causing problems in class, there is little offered in terms of really tapping into what he could do. A ‘C’, or average grade, seems to the teachers to mean that everything is fine. But isn’t more than that needed if he wants to go to college?

The parent talks with friends and other community members and starts a focus group, meeting in a local
church. She learns that her concerns were widely shared. Together, they work out a network of parents sharing their concerns and develop a plan for bringing their initial concerns closer to a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem, as well as closer to concrete actions for change. Teachers known to be very successful, with high expectations for students, are invited to participate. Over the next year, they meet regularly, collecting data through interviews, meeting notes and field notes, hold focus group discussions with parents and teachers, and examine school documents. As they sort and analyse their data, their understanding of ‘meaningful parental involvement’ emerges over time. Both teachers and parents take on leadership roles and all gain research skills. They share their findings by producing a booklet that other groups can use in assessing their school’s family–school relationships, including suggested actions for each of the seven points of their findings (Tellin’ Stories Project, 2000).

A community organizing story

A community activist and research group has long been interested in addressing the widely acknowledged gaps in achievement between various racial/ethnic and socio-economic groups. Building on long-standing traditions of community organizing, with direct links to the ideas of people like Myles Horton and Saul Alinsky (two well-known USA community organizers), they work at developing a broad sense of parent involvement that includes not only attention at the school level to curriculum and teaching but participation in the policy-making and also budget-making processes.

Many educators say that they cannot do the work of educating children alone, particularly low- and moderate-income children and children of color. Unfortunately, there are few mechanisms that allow parents and community members in low-income neighborhoods to play a meaningful role in the education of their children. For many people involved in education, parent participation is not seen as important or meaningful. As Lucy Ruiz, a parent and organizer with the Alliance Organizing Project in Philadelphia put it, ‘Parents are seen as the pretzel sellers’. The common viewpoint is that parents are seen as the people who drop their kids off at school, conduct fundraisers, and occasionally volunteer time in a classroom. Community organizing seeks to change that dynamic. (Gold et al., 2002: 4)

Such groups work with the assumption that public schools are neither equitable nor effective for all students. Unlike other contemporary efforts, which focus on ‘standards’ and high-stakes testing of students, these efforts begin with building a large base of members with solid relationships and shared responsibilities. Through such efforts, leadership emerges not from the professional community alone, but from community residents, taking charge of the education of their own children through democratic processes. In this way, the organizing efforts are also educative efforts, which build a power base for the communities through knowledge and action linkages.

Information gathering plays a major role, as parents share concerns about the safety of the school buildings their children attend and ask questions such as ‘Why do our children have to drink out of lead fountains, and play in dirt? Why do some communities have better facilities and more programmes than ours does?’ Instead of ending with the listing of grievances, the process reveals a need to research the questions, to document the disparities, to analyse budgets, to make plans to present findings to governing bodies, to take field notes on their responses. Such data are used to further understand the issues, but also to plan strategic actions for improvement. Work following this model has included a large number of projects with different targets. For example, groups have lobbied for funding changes, worked for the creation of after-school programmes, documented school safety issues, addressed issues related to the racial climate in schools, and sponsored new kinds of staff development programmes for teachers and administrators. While the particular issues vary by community, the overall goal stays constant – building knowledge within communities, with a form of knowledge that assumes a direct connection between understanding and action. That knowledge also connects to a long-term project: that of building a new theory of change, one that emphasizes community capacity building alongside school improvement.

A student story

Very few educational action research projects look at issues from the standpoint of the students, although teaching students to be systematic enquirers is a
frequent goal for schooling. A student voice might start an action research project as well:

It’s so boring. But it’s also confusing. I think that I know what I’m supposed to be doing and learning, but then the tests don’t seem to match. I want to do well, but every time I study, it seems like it just doesn’t work. When I learn things at home, from my family, it’s so clear. They tell stories, show me how to do things, let me practice, and enjoy the products when we’re finished. It’s a group effort, not just me under the spotlight.

Working with an after-school group and its leader – a local graduate student – the children share similar stories and note a common theme of how their families help them learn in different ways than the school does. They want to know more about how their parents see learning at home and learning at school. The group generates a list of possible avenues to pursue, and agrees to begin with a ‘family stories of school’ project.

The students learn to develop interview protocols and use audio recording and digital cameras to gather parents’ views on learning and schools. As the interviews are being completed, students learn how to analyse the material for recurrent themes and patterns. These are in turn used to organize excerpts for public sharing. Vignettes of family ‘learning times’ – covering a wide range of skills and contexts (for example, housework, childcare, construction, automotive work, the arts; in churches, libraries, businesses) are included.

Overall, the data showed a tendency to work collaboratively on a concrete task which had mutual benefits, with the students learning as they worked. They also showed the many ways in which families support their children’s schooling. But another theme emerged as parents moved from concrete conversations about family learning to remembrances of their own experiences with schooling. Many parents, most often parents of colour or those from low-income families shared stories that spoke of alienation – times when as children they felt and even today feel disrespect or a lack of cultural awareness by school staff. Their anger and hurt came through as powerful indicators of their commitment to their children’s education: they worked with and encouraged the children despite these experiences.

When the research was shared with school personnel, the impact was mixed. Some were angry and ‘tired of being called a racist’. Others, though, wanted to find out more about how they could learn to teach in new ways, how to interact with the communities differently. A small group said, ‘Finally. Now perhaps we can move forward.’

Each of these stories highlights different communities of researchers and thereby embodies differing values which are, in turn, related to different ideological orientations. In that way, all of the projects share a concern with a particular political agenda, although one group might identify this as a professional concern while another articulates the concern in terms of its sense of community. Likewise, all of the ‘stories’ involve a personal dimension in the sense that they all require rethinking of one’s actions in the world and reevaluating their worth and effectiveness. The projects do not emerge in a linear fashion from research questions derived solely from academic definitions of researchable topics. Rather they revolve around questions that are integrally tied to practice; they are formed from a need for change which is driven by, and in the process generative of, new knowledge. They are research from ‘inside’, but at the same time show how the participants in the research, through the cycles of research, often define and often redefine who counts as an insider and who an outsider. All of the stories too work toward a new form of theory-practice relationship, in some cases through including ‘popular’ as well as ‘academic’ knowledge forms.

Annotated bibliography


Provides information on research methods and practical exercises in a readable form. It draws on education, but the ideas can easily be adapted.


Presents a major action research project carried out in a hospital ward. A good example of an insider/outside partnership.
CARN website [Collaborative Action Research Network]: <http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carn/>

CARN is an international network founded in 1976 which hosts an annual conference. Membership includes a free subscription to *Educational Action Research*.


A detailed rationale for action research as a way of putting into practice ideas from critical theory.


Part one provides a detailed rationale for teacher research. Part two comprises 21 examples of teachers' research writing.


Through a detailed account of one teacher's action research and the reflections of her tutor (the author), this book gives unusual insights to the processes of action research and professional development.

*Educational Action Research (EAR)*

EAR, founded in 1991, is an international journal which defines action research broadly and includes a wide range of contributions from practitioners' accounts of action research projects to scholarly articles on methodology.


The short autobiographical introduction explaining Elliott's commitment to curriculum change is followed by case studies of teachers' professional learning.


An excellent collection of articles on action research drawn from many countries and professional settings.


A comprehensive scholarly review of action research from the earliest days to the mid-1990s.


Spans action research across the social sciences. It is divided into four parts (‘groundings’, ‘practices’, ‘exemplars’ and ‘skills’).


A key resource for those carrying out action research in health and social care settings.

Further references


