

McNiff, Jean and Whitehead, Jack (2011) All you need to know about action research, 2nd edition. SAGE Publications.

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# ONE

## What Is Action Research?

The action research family is wide and diverse, so inevitably different people say different things about what action research is and what it is for, and who can do it and how. You need to know about these issues, so you can take an active part in the debates. Taking part also helps you appreciate why you should do action research and what you can hope to achieve.

This chapter is organized into four sections that deal with these issues.

- 1 What action research is and is not
- 2 Different approaches to action research
- 3 Purposes of action research
- 4 When and when not to use action research

### 1 What action research is and is not

Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, 'What am I doing? Do I need to improve anything? If so, what? How do I improve it?' They produce their accounts of practice to show: (1) how they are trying to improve what they are doing, which involves first thinking about and learning how to do it better; and (2) how they try to influence others to do the same thing. These accounts stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish.

Action research has become increasingly popular around the world as a form of professional learning. It has been particularly well developed in education, specifically in teaching, but is now used widely across the professions. A major attraction of action research is that everyone can do it, so it is for 'ordinary' practitioners as well as principals, managers and administrators. Students also can and should do action research (McNiff, 2010a; see also page XX of this book). You can gain university accreditation for your action enquiries, as the case studies in this book show.

Action research can be a powerfully liberating form of professional enquiry because it means that practitioners themselves investigate their practices as they find ways to live more fully in the direction of their educational values. They are not told what to do. They decide for themselves what to do, in negotiation with others. This can work in relation to individual as well as collective enquiries. More and more groups of practitioners are getting together to investigate their collective work and put their stories of learning into the public domain. Your story can add to this collection and strengthen it.

This is what makes action research distinctive. Practitioners research their own practices, which is different from traditional forms of social science research, where a professional researcher does research on practitioners. Social scientists tend to stand outside a situation and ask, 'What are those people over there doing? How do we understand and explain what they are doing?' This kind of research is often called outsider or spectator research. Action researchers, however, are insider researchers. They see themselves as part of the context they are investigating, and ask, individually and collectively, 'Is my/our work going as we wish? How do we improve it where necessary?' If they feel their work is already reasonably satisfactory, they evaluate it and produce evidence to show why they believe this to be the case. If they feel something needs improving, they work on that aspect, keeping records and producing regular oral and written progress reports about what they are doing.

Here are some examples of social science (outsider) questions and action research (insider) questions to show the difference between them.

#### Social science (outsider) questions

- What is the relationship between nurses' practice-based knowledge and the quality of patient care?
- Does management style influence worker productivity?
- Will a different seating arrangement increase audience participation?

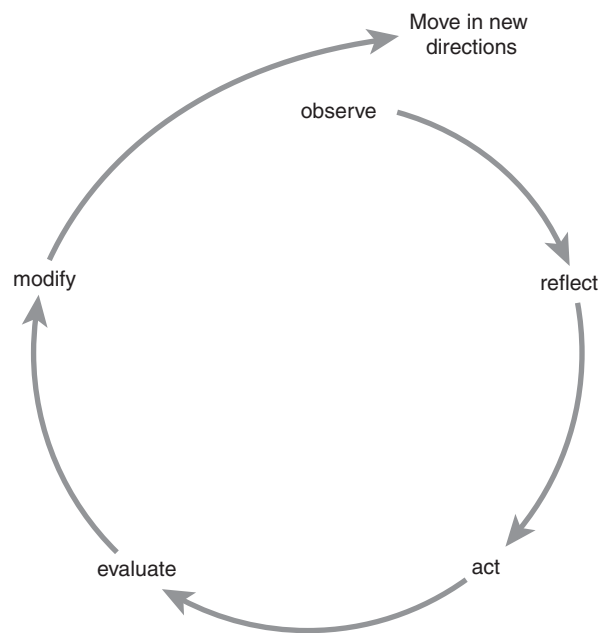
#### Action research (insider) questions

- How do I study my nursing practice for the benefit of the patients?
- How do I improve my management style to encourage productivity?
- How do I encourage greater audience participation through trying out different seating arrangements?

Action research aims to be a disciplined, systematic process. A notional action plan is:

- take stock of what is going on;
- identify a concern;
- think of a possible way forward;

- try it out;
- monitor the action by gathering data to show what is happening;
- evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what is happening;
- test the validity of claims to knowledge;
- modify practice in light of the evaluation. (This is a modified version of the plan in McNiff and Whitehead, 2010)



**Figure 1.1** An action–reflection cycle

This can be turned into a set of questions, as follows:

- What is my concern?
- Why am I concerned?
- How do I show the situation as it is and as it develops?
- What can I do about it? What will I do about it?
- How do I test the validity of my claims to knowledge?
- How do I check that any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How do I modify my ideas and practices in light of the evaluation? (Adapted from Whitehead, 1989)

In practical terms, this means you would identify a particular concern, try out a different way of doing things, reflect on what was happening, check out any

new understandings with others, and in light of your reflections try a different way that may or may not be more successful. As a nurse, for example, you would monitor and evaluate how you were relating to patients, and how they were responding to you (Higgs and Titchen, 2001). This would help you find the best way of working with patients to encourage their self-motivation towards recovery. As a sales person you would experiment with different seating arrangements to find the best ways of selling your product (see Varga, 2009, for ideas).

The process of 'observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions' is generally known as action–reflection, although no single term is used in the literature. Because the process tends to be cyclical, it is often referred to as an action–reflection cycle (Figure 1.1). The process is ongoing because as soon as we reach a provisional point where we feel things are satisfactory, that point itself raises new questions and it is time to begin again. Good visual models exist in the literature to communicate this process (Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2002).

## 2 Different approaches to action research

The action research family has been around for a long time, at least since the 1930s, and has become increasingly influential. As often happens, however, different family members have developed different opinions and interests, some have developed their own terminology, and some have formed breakaway groups, which have in turn become mainstreamed. You need to decide which kind of action research is best for you, which means developing a critical perspective to some key issues. These are as follows.

- Different views of what action research is about and which perspective to take.
- Different forms of action research and different names and terminology.

### Different views of what action research is about and which perspective to take

There is general agreement among the action research community that action research is about:

- **action:** taking action to improve practice, and ...
- **research:** finding things out and coming to new understandings, that is, creating new knowledge. In action research the knowledge is about how and why improvement has happened.

There is disagreement about:

- The balance between taking action and doing research: many texts emphasize the need to take action but not to do research. This turns action research into

a form of personal-professional development but without a solid research/knowledge base.

- Who does the action and who does the research, that is, who creates the knowledge.

Furthermore, because knowledge contributes to theory, that is, explanations for how and why things happen, it becomes a question of who does the action and who generates the theory (explanations) about the action. Take the example of a film set (this will remind you of issues already raised).

On film sets, some people are positioned, and frequently position themselves, as actors and agents (doers), while others see themselves as directors and producers (thinkers). Practitioners in workplaces are usually seen as actors whose job is to do things, while researchers in research institutions such as universities are seen as directors and producers whose job is to direct what the practitioner-actors do. They produce explanations about what the actors are doing and why they are doing it. The hidden assumptions are that the actors are good at acting but are not able to theorize what they are doing; while the directors are good at theorizing what the actors are doing and writing reports about it. Theory and practice are seen as separate, and theory is generally seen as more prestigious than practice. This attitude is normal in the world of social science research (see above), where a researcher writes reports about what other people are doing. Ironically it is also commonplace in certain forms of action research. The difference between a social science scenario and an action research scenario is that in social science the aim is to demonstrate a causal relationship ('If I do this, that will happen'), whereas in action research the aim is to improve practice. However, the power relationships between actor and theorist remain the same.

These issues have given rise to different perspectives and terminologies in the literatures. Furthermore, another issue about the type of theory enters the debate.

### Different forms of action research and different names and terminology

Broadly speaking, the action research family falls into two groups, sometimes looking like dynasties or clans, and these also sub-divide.

The first group was founded by John Elliott, Stephen Kemmis, Clem Adelman and others (see Chapter 4). It contains people who believe that the proper way to do research is for an external researcher to watch and report on what other practitioners are doing. This is generally referred to as interpretive action research. It is probably still the most common form of action research around.

The second group was founded by Jack Whitehead (Chapter 4), and contains people who believe that a practitioner is able to offer their own explanations for what they are doing. This is referred to variously as self-study action research, first-person action research, living theory action research, or just plain action research.

However, the differences between outsider and insider groupings are often not clear, because people sometimes tend not to take a definitive stance, but position themselves somewhere between the two.

What is different, however, is the *form* of theory (explanations) used. Externalist forms of theory are about what ‘they’ are doing, and tend to speak about action research as a ‘thing’ to be implemented. Person-centred forms of theory are about what ‘I’ am doing as a living person. ‘I’ speak about action research as something I do, part of ‘my’ experience. ‘My’ theories take on a living form: the explanations the person offers for their life and practices are within the way they live and practise. So it is usual nowadays to understand the word ‘theory’ in two ways: as an abstract propositional form about what is happening for other people; and as an embodied living form about what is happening for me. This latter view has given rise to the term ‘living theory’, which is seen as distinct from ordinary ‘theory’.

### More cousins

To complicate matters, the two main groups have given rise to different sub-groups who have given themselves different names. The following is a rough guide, as the situation changes rapidly and allegiances shift.

#### *Within the group who espouse propositional forms of theory*

Here are some of those groupings in question, and some definitions of action research.

Reason and Bradbury (2008) have developed a useful typology, which they call ‘first-, second- and third-person action research’. They (2008: 6) say:

‘First-person research is the kind of research that enables the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act choicefully and with awareness, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. ...’ Second-person research is when the practitioner can ‘inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern ...’ Third-person research looks at influencing wider social systems, and to create ‘... a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other ... have an impersonal quality.’

Others speak about participatory action research: this term was first used when action research came to prominence in the 1940s and 1950s and referred to groups who wished to reclaim lands taken from them; it was associated with the work of Orlando Fals Borda and shares the same heritage as scholars such as Paulo Freire. Today, participatory action research has the same undertones as the original version, but tends to be used as emphasizing the participative nature of action research: however, this could be seen as tautological because action research is by default participative. Similarly, some people speak about ‘collaborative action research’, which again would appear to be unnecessary, because action research is always collaborative.

Then you have Feminist Participatory Action Research (Reid and Frisby 2008), Educational Action Research and Practitioner Action Research (all tautological). At a tangent you have action learning, which emphasizes the actions of work-based learning rather than theory-generation (though action learning is shifting more and more towards action research these days), and action science, which takes a more scientific stance towards demonstrating causal relationships. Furthermore, many of these different groupings cross over or draw on other movements such as narrative inquiry, appreciative inquiry and complexity theory; so it is difficult to see where one piece of scholarly territory ends and another begins.

The same is happening in the other camp.

#### *Within the group who espouse living forms of theory*

Since the 1970s Jack Whitehead has been promoting the idea of individuals studying their practices and offering descriptions and explanations for what they do. This view is well established in the literatures under the broad names of self-study action research, or living theory action research (which is technically inaccurate but has caught on). Jack and Jean McNiff began working together in the 1980s and they have had significant influence in contemporary thinking. The book you are reading comes out of this perspective.

In 1993, at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in San Francisco, a group of action researchers inclined towards self-study met to discuss which directions action research should take. The group included Jean Clandinin, Gaalen Erickson, Stefinee Pinnegar, Tom Russell and Jack Whitehead. They felt that action research should be about the self studying the self, the living 'I' studying their own practices. Out of this meeting a new perspective and a new Special Interest Group (SIG) was born: the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP). However, over the nigh-20 years of its existence, many in the S-STEP group seem to have broken away from the idea of action research, and some see self-study as mainly about improving practice without the need to do research in order to generate theory, a situation that returns us to the same hierarchical power relationships that the SIG was originally set up to challenge.

Added to this, many people within these groupings prefer to speak only about reflective practice. However, taken on its own, reflective practice could be seen as people reflecting on what they are doing without necessarily taking action to improve it. You can sit all day reflecting on what you are doing but this is no use when trying to improve social situations with justification, which means drawing on a research base that demands personal accountability.

So there we are: a wonderful rich tapestry of people, all working with the same purposes of finding better ways of creating a better world, from their different values perspectives and methodological commitments. It would be difficult for any novice to enter this world and immediately make sense of who is doing what and why, because there is no clearly delineated route map, and people who are



active in the field move around and change perspective. Perhaps the best advice for beginning action researchers is to read as much as possible, and keep a level head when dealing with different terminology. Keep in mind that the key issues are about the politics of theory – who counts as a knower, who is able to offer explanations, about what, what counts as knowledge, and who makes decisions about these things.

This brings us to ideas about the purposes of research in general and action research in particular.

### 3 Purposes of action research

The purpose of all research is to generate new knowledge. Action research generates a special kind of knowledge.

We said above that ‘action research’ contains the words ‘action’ and ‘research’. The action piece of action research is about improving practice. The ‘research’ piece of action research is about offering descriptions and explanations for what you are doing as and when you improve practice. Another word for ‘descriptions and explanations’ is ‘theory’. Like all research, the purpose of action research is (1) to generate new knowledge, which (2) feeds into new theory. When you generate new knowledge, you say that you know something now that you did not know before: for example, ‘I now know more about car mechanics’, or ‘I understand better how to dance properly’. You need this knowledge in order to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it (to theorize what you are doing). You say, ‘I can describe and explain how and why I have learned about car mechanics’ or ‘I can describe and explain why it is important to dance properly’. Being able to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it also enables you to be clear about its significance for your field, which is important when it comes to saying why your research should be believed and taken seriously by others, especially peers (see Part V).

By doing your action research you are hoping, therefore, to make knowledge claims such as the following:

- I have improved my practice as a nurse, and I can describe what I have done and explain why I have done it.
- I am a better manager than before because I have studied what I am doing, and I can explain how and why I have improved it.

Action research has always been understood as people taking action to improve their personal and social situations, and offering explanations for why they do so. Some see its potential for promoting a more productive and peaceful world order (Heron, 1998; Heron and Reason, 2001). New work is emerging about ecoliteracy (Sinclair, 2010) and sustainable improvement (Scott, 2010; Tattersall, 2010).

Educational action research is widely seen as a methodology for real-world social change. People communicate their ideas as theories of real-world practice, by explaining what they are doing, why they are doing it and what they hope to achieve. These personal theories are also living theories, because they change and develop as people themselves change and develop. In the perspective adopted by us authors, the aims of action researchers are to generate living theories about how their learning has improved practice and is informing new practices for themselves and others.

The best accounts show the transformation of practice into living theories. The individual practitioner asks, 'What am I doing? How do I understand it in order to improve it? How can I draw on ideas in the literature and incorporate them into my own understanding? How do I transform these ideas into action?' Asking these questions can help practitioners to find practical ways of living in the direction of their educational and social values. The examples throughout this book show how this can be done.

## 4 When and when not to use action research

You can use action research for many purposes, but not for all.

### When to use action research

Use action research when you want to evaluate whether what you are doing is influencing your own or other people's learning, or whether you need to do something different. You may want to:

#### *Improve your understanding*

- Patient waiting time in the hospital is too long. How are you going to find out why, so that you can do something about it?
- Your students are achieving remarkably high scores. Why? Is it your teaching, their extra study, or a new classroom environment?

#### *Develop your learning*

- How do you learn to encourage people to be more positive?
- How do you learn to improve your own timekeeping?

#### *Influence others' learning*

- How do you help colleagues to develop more inclusive pedagogies?
- How do you encourage your senior management team partners to listen more carefully to employees?

## When not to use action research

Do not use action research if you want to draw comparisons, show statistical correlations or demonstrate a cause and effect relationship. For example:

- You want to see whether adults who are accompanied by children are more likely to wait at pedestrian crossings than those who are not accompanied by children, so you would do an observational study and include statistical analyses of a head count.
- You want to see why some male teachers seem reluctant to teach relationships and sexuality education, so you would probably do a survey and analyse the results. You may also possibly do a comparative analysis of results from your survey and another survey you have read about in the literatures, which aims to find out which subjects teachers find most attractive.
- You want to show the effects of good leadership on organizational motivation. You could interview a sample of employees and analyse their responses in terms of identified categories. You would probably also interview a sample of business leaders and get their opinions on the relationship between their leadership and the quality of employees' motivation.

These are social science topics where researchers ask questions of the kind, 'What are those people doing? What do they say? How many of them do it?' Action research questions, however, take the form, 'How do I understand what I am doing? How do I improve it?', and place the emphasis on the researcher's intent to take action for personal and social improvement.

A point to remember is that these kinds of social science topics can be included within practitioner researchers' living theories. Questions that ask 'How do I ...?' need to identify a clear starting point for the research, what Elliott (1991) calls a reconnaissance phase, and they often incorporate questions of the form 'What is happening here?' (see page XX). However, it is necessary to go beyond fact-finding and into action if real-world situations are to be improved.

Here is an example of how 'How do I ...?' questions can incorporate 'What is happening here?' questions.

### 'How do I ...?' questions

How do I stop the bullying in my office?

How do I encourage my students to read?

### 'What is happening here?' questions

How many colleagues are being bullied?

Who is bullying whom?

Why are they bullying them?

What kind of books do my students read at present?

How many categories of books are in the college library?

How much time is given to

independent reading in the curriculum?

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## Summary

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This chapter has set out some core issues in action research. It has explained that, unlike social science, action research places the individual 'I' at the centre of an enquiry. Different forms of action research have emerged over the years, which prioritize different aspects. Action research can be useful when investigating how to improve learning and take social action. It is inappropriate for investigations that aim to draw comparisons or establish cause and effect relationships.

The next chapter deals with the interesting and contested question of who can do action research, and who says.

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## Further reading

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A range of books is available that explain what action research is and is not. Among the most useful are the following.

McNiff, J. (2002) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. London: Routledge.

A seminal text that established new principles of thinking and a tradition of academic writing for everyday practitioners. About to go into its third edition, the book remains a practical work-based textbook.

McNiff, J. (2010) *Action Research for Professional Development: Concise Advice for New (and Experienced) Action Researchers*. Dorset: September.

A developed version of the ubiquitous booklet to be found at <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/ar-booklet.asp> (still available free and for downloading), this new book covers a lot of ground in a succinct and easily accessible way.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2010) *You and Your Action Research Project*. Abingdon: Routledge.

New and updated in its third edition, this book takes you through the entire process of doing an action research project.

Reason, J. and Bradbury, J. (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*. London: Sage.

An action research classic, the Handbook covers the territory of action research from a more academic perspective. Excellent as a reference book, but not for light reading.

Whitehead, J. (1989) 'Creating a living educational theory through questions of the kind, "how do I improve my practice?"', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19 (1): 137–53.

A seminal paper that remains relevant for all professions, and that was influential in establishing self-study action research as a major tradition.

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