

ACTION RESEARCH

The origins of action research lie in the work of social scientists in the 1930s and 40s who argued for a closer link between research and the solving of immediate social problems. From the beginning, advocates of this approach were concerned with addressing real world issues, concerns and needs as they arose (Lewin, 1946:35). Nowadays, action research is often a preferred approach in a variety of settings among professionals who want to use research to improve their practice and to support organisational development (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; McNiff, 2013). In particular, the approach is often used in areas such as organisational development, education, health and social care.

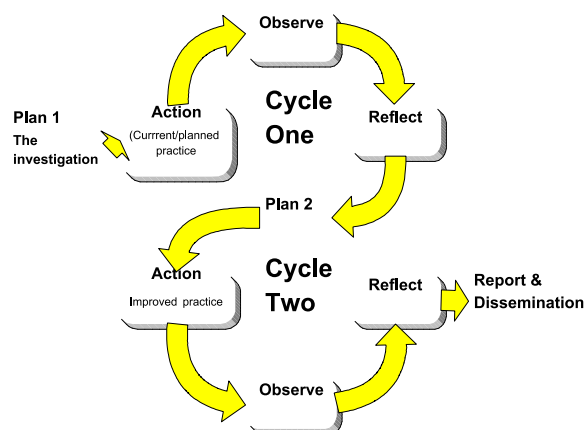
Action research is about solving practical issues, and, rather than being a dispassionate and uninvolved observer, the researcher becomes an active participant in the research process (Hayes 2000:196). Using this approach, the aim is not just to acquire a better understanding of the issues and problems that arise in everyday practice, the aim is to also alter things for the better. It is a strategy for social research and social justice rather than a specific method (Denscombe, 2010).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ACTION RESEARCH

The characteristics of action research are as follows.

1. It is notable for *its practical orientation*, the solving of every-day problems and issues;
2. *Change is seen to be an integral part of research*, and, using this approach, the aim is to bring about a change in practice;
3. The researcher adopts *a cyclical approach* when planning and carrying out the investigation, the stages being as follows (see figure 1):

Figure 1
Cycles of Action Research



- a. the process begins with a period of direct observation the purpose of which is to gain a better understanding of the issues involved and to identify possible solutions;
- b. reflecting on the results of this diagnosis, a strategy for change is developed and the intervention is planned;
- c. the planning stage is followed by a period of action during which the intervention is carried out;
- d. later, the researcher analyses what has happened and reflects on what more needs to be done to address the problem. Depending on the outcomes of the evaluation, and whether or not those involved feel more needs to be done, he or she, may embark on another cycle, beginning with the diagnostic stage. Working in this way, the research can evolve to become a spiral of linked cycles of investigation where one issue forms the basis of another, and one question leads to another. The research feeds back into practice and the process is ongoing (Denscombe, 2010). Figure 1 is a representation of how the process might look when someone is engaged in action research as a form of practitioner enquiry. Here, action research is portrayed as a cyclical process of action, observation (data gathering), reflection on practice and follow-up action, and then further periods of observation and reflection which may indicate the need for another cycle. Usually, the research will involve more than one cycle but no more than two or three.

4. A fourth and crucial characteristic is that subjects, as well as the researcher, should be active and not passive participants in the investigation.

Focusing on this fourth characteristic, there is a strong tradition in action research in which it is argued that everyone involved in the research process should be seen to be equal participants (Grundy and Kemmis, 1988:7), and, of practitioners being seen to initiate the research (Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2013; also <http://www.jeanmcniff.com/>). When discussing the role of practitioners in action research, Denscombe (2008:127) offers the following observation:

The research, in this sense, is practitioner-driven, with the practitioner not just an equal partner but a sponsor and director of the research process. And if this sounds radical, there are others who would push the matter further, insisting that the practitioner should be the dominant partner, calling the shots at all stages and in all aspects of the research.

The involvement of participants is an important departure from traditional notions of scientific, objective research, and the idea of research being the detached study of 'subjects'. However, adopting a social constructionist position, Reason and Rowan (1981), for example, claim research is never fully 'objective' or 'neutral', and argue for what they consider to be a more honest way of conducting research, one that is more respectful of participants as active, enquiring human beings. Similarly, Heron (1996) and Reason (1994) argue passionately for an ethical position in which research is 'done with rather than to' people. Furthermore, Hayes (2000:198-199) makes the point that in most research situations people are not as passive as some researchers like to think, and that the mere presence of the researcher in the field has some contaminating effect. Developing the point, she moves on to suggest the active participation of subjects in research serves to reduce the biasing impact of extraneous variables.

TYPES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Among some researchers, action research is seen to be another research method to be used in certain circumstances, although my own view is that it is better understood as an approach rather than a method. Furthermore, there are different approaches to action research. Some researchers combine the use of quantitative methods when gathering and analysing data with the active involvement of participants. Using the approach in this way, they may, for example, choose and use methods of gathering and analysing data that allow them to measure the effects of their actions. Others researchers take a social constructionist position, preferring to use qualitative methods when gathering and analysing data. The important thing to remember though is that different methods of gathering data can be used when engaging in action research:

Action research can use different techniques for data collection... Action researchers with a background in psychology tend to prefer questionnaires for such purposes... while action researchers with a background in applied anthropology, psychoanalysis or social-technical systems tend to prefer direct observation and/or in-depth interviewing... Action researchers with any of these backgrounds may also retrieve data from the records, memos and reports that the client system routinely produces.

(Susman and Evered, 1978:589, cited in Denscombe, 2010)

CHANGE AND CONTINUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the most common areas of research, in which the approach of action research is used, is in professional development. Laurence Stenhouse (1970, 1975, 1979, 1980, 1983, & 1984) is credited with promoting the idea of the teacher-researcher when he was director of the Humanities Curriculum project, and in his subsequent publications. His principal concern was the emancipation, or liberation, of students, teachers and educational establishments from knowledge and practices prescribed by others. He argued that students, teachers and educational establishments should be empowered to critically examine prescribed knowledge and practices, and to discover and own forms of knowledge, and ways of working for themselves. More recently, McNiff (2013) has carried forward this argument for the democratising of the research process and the legitimacy of teachers as theorists and creators of 'living epistemologies of practice'. Commenting on the possibilities for creating a community of teacher-researchers, McNiff (2002) has this to say:

Given these ideas of how individuals can work together to create their own societies, it is not difficult to imagine how organisational development may be encouraged. Each individual undertakes their personal enquiry into an aspect of their own practice, and then share that enquiry with others, and together they form research collectives. These collectives can systematically evaluate the practice of one individual, or they might ask their own collective questions about how they can improve their understanding and circumstances. Much social community development happens along these lines.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ACTION RESEARCH

ADVANTAGES

- Problems and issues in everyday life are addressed in a practical and positive way, feeding the results of research directly back into practice. It takes the form of continuous cycles of development and change.
- Action research is appropriate for small-scale, in-depth research.
- Action research gives the researcher the freedom to develop and refine the research process as it happens, and to respond to new circumstances.
- It recognises the fact that people are not passive, and that the mere presence of a researcher is always likely to affect the outcomes of the investigation, and, the active involvement and participation in the research by participants serves to reduce the impact of extraneous variables.
- It responds to an ethical concern that research should be ‘done with and not to’ people. It carries forward arguments for the democratising of the research process and the legitimacy of teachers as theorists and creators of ‘living epistemologies of practice’. It is about social justice.
- It has personal benefits for the practitioner, as it contributes to professional development.

DISADVANTAGES

- The involvement of practitioners limits the scope and scale of the research, limiting the extent to which the findings can be generalised.
- The integration of research and practice limits the extent to which relevant variables can be manipulated and controlled, and therefore raises questions about the objectivity of the research.
- The researcher is unlikely to be detached and impartial in his, or her, approach to the research.
- The nature of the research is constrained by what is seen to be permissible and ethical within the workplace.
- Ownership of the research process becomes contestable.
- Action research potentially increases the workload of practitioners, particularly in the early stages, and before the benefits of this way of working can be experienced.

REPORTING APPROACHES: GENERAL STRUCTURE OF STUDY

- Purpose – what you set out to achieve and why

- Introduction (problem, questions)
- An account of the situation and action to improve it, research procedures (action research, data collection, analysis, outcomes)
- Critical analysis of the strategies used and the effectiveness of the actions taken
- Interpretation, lessons learned, questions raised

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