Introduction to Action Research

The term 'action research' has many meanings that are highly contested in theory and practice. As well there are other terms such as—practitioner research, teacher research, practitioner inquiry, critical reflection—that some people use to designate research used by teachers to examine their own theory/practice. The *Connecting Lives and Learning* project used the term 'action research' because we think the term accurately describes what we had in mind.

Short history

'Action research' has a long history in the social sciences, being developed in the 1920s as a transformative approach to knowledge production. As such, action research has been developed as an approach to build knowledge that brings together the imperative to know and the need to change the world. Some social problems, especially those that involve 'improving practice', demand approaches to knowing that don't artificially separate understanding and action. The action research approach has a well developed philosophical/epistemological grounding and extensive published case studies in various disciplines, including nursing, community development, feminist studies, indigenous studies and education.

In education, action research has various well developed versions including those developed by Stenhouse (UK), Noffke and Stevenson (Noffke and Stevenson, 1995) (US), Kemmis and McTaggart (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1990) (Aust.), Smyth (Smyth, 1989) (Aust), Moore and Reid (Education for Social Justice Research Group, 1994)(Aust) and Comber (Compton-Lilly and Comber, 2003)(Aust). Action research has its own journals (e.g. Educational Action Research[1]), and is well represented in Handbooks of Qualitative Research (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000) and Reviews of Research in Education (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999).

In Australia, action research was developed in the 1970-80s in conjunction with the school-based curriculum development movement. As such, action research has been connected to a range of innovative curriculum development projects such as the Disadvantaged School project (DSP and the National Schools Network (NSN). Such projects assume that educational innovations are driven by teachers as producers of knowledge. As well, action research has been incorporated into teacher education (undergraduate and post graduate).

Action research broadly speaking

Teachers are constantly, perhaps unconsciously, making decisions about their teaching practice. Refining what they do about individual students, assessment, worthwhile learning activities and a whole range of other issues. This process of reflection usually occurs on the run so to speak, usually while engaged with the teaching/learning process. Usually reflection occurs as a solitary event.

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[1] http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09650792.asp

Action research is much more that this. Action research is a collaborative approach to working in schools by teachers committed to improving their teaching for the benefit of all students. For our purpose action research has these three key elements: operational or technical, collaboration, and critical reflection.

Operational

Most action research approaches describe some form of research spiral, such as: (i) Plan, act observe, reflect, or (ii) Describe, inform, confront, reconstruct. The spiral provides a set of stages or a process to work with. In reality the process is a bit messier but the spiral is a useful format to guide planning.

Collaboration

The research process is best conducted in a network of critical friends; a critical community. For this project, this means having the opportunity to reflect and plan with other teachers and university researchers. A community of critical learners aims to provide an environment where people can share frustrations, ideas, strategies, as well as critical, supportive feedback about their work in schools.

Critical reflection

Being 'critical' in action research is about seeing teachers' work in context. Critical reflection ponders such questions as: in whose interests? How did things get to be this way? How can schooling be changed to serve the most disadvantaged students? Critical reflection examines the following: the discourse or language of school - how people talk about and categorise teaching and students; activities - what counts as learning and participation and; the structures and organisation - how people relate to each other (power and authority relations).

Issues for doing action research in schools

Gap between the intended, enacted and real curriculum

Teachers work in a context in which the intended curriculum (what's planned/documented) often does match either the enacted (what the teacher does) or real curriculum (what the students experience). Research in schools examines these gaps.

The significant issues need problem-posing not problem-solving

The most significant problems for teachers, such as, making the curriculum relevant for their students, can't be fixed through conventional problem-solving approaches. Instead, problem-posing is required. Problem-posing then is not about going for the solution but about problematising the situation. Problematising is a process in which you assume there is more to the matter than meets the eye. A starting point for problematising is a realisation that common sense has probably deceived you. Problematising requires uncovering the complexity of the situation. Rather than go for an immediate resolution there is a need to realise that many issues need careful consideration - the situation is treated as open-ended, not necessarily unresolvable but requiring more information, a range of perspectives and greater participation by others to get a more satisfactory result.

School change is messy: requires an integration of restructuring, reculturing, changing pedagogy

The significant issues also require whole school changes. Such changes can be understood to involve restructuring, reculturing and changing pedagogy. In this project we are aiming to work out how the restructuring and reculturing can be made to work to bring about pedagogical innovation.

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Schools are very pragmatic and mostly interested in improving practice

Research in schools is mostly driven by the imperative to improve practice; its practice after all that determines learning outcomes. As such the knowledge interests of teachers are usually not abstracted theory but curriculum and pedagogical practice. We need a research approach that focuses on improving practice.

Being reflective requires effort and conducive conditions

Reflective practice, such as action research, doesn't just happen but requires conducive conditions and effort on the part of teachers. At a minimum, action research in schools requires support from school leaders, time to design a coherent research project, critical friends to discuss the research, and resources to conduct the research. For this project, we are convening research roundtables, and supporting teachers-as-researchers in schools.

Teachers are theorists

Teachers are often represented as being disinterested in theory but in reality good teachers are uncanny theorists of school systems, school reform and their own practice. 'Theory' is this case is about making sense of what is going on and how things might be improved. Teacher theorists are open to thinking about their practice in new ways, especially if informed by the research of others.

Schools do have some autonomy

Many teachers focus on the impediments to change and loose sight of the autonomy that schools actually have available to them. The sort of autonomy we are attempting to activate in this project is the freedom to design and implement curriculum through negotiation with students.

Teachers are the key to reform efforts

The rationale for this project is based on a concern for improving learning outcomes for students who traditionally don't experience success at school. Improving learning requires changes to teaching practice and that can only occur if teachers are viewed as the key to the reform. Building pedagogy that connects to the lifeworlds of students can only be managed at the classroom level. This project has been designed with teachers as the major actors in the reform

Leadership is essential in all of the above

Obviously reforms of this type require supportive leadership. This project has been designed with that in mind. The project is a collaboration with the Northern Adelaide Secondary Principals Network. Issues that will require ongoing attention though will be: working to ensure participating teachers have in school support as the project proceeds; and, attending to the issues of transition from primary schools

What is good action research?

Attempting to define good action research requires a lot more space than we have here but to begin the process we want to suggest the following characteristics.

Focused on improving practice

Action research projects aim to improve practice; and in the case of classroom action research the focus is to improve teaching and learning (pedagogy).

Owned by teachers / the school

Most importantly, action research is research that is owned by the teacher and conducted on the teachers own practice. Action research doesn't involve someone researching someone else. Action research may involve others as facilitators or critical friends, but the process must be owned by the participating teachers. The process is most powerful if teachers get to design their own questions and have complete control of the research process. Action research can be used as a part of performance management but this may impede the process if teachers feel that their careers are on the line. In this project, the general research problem that we hope participating teachers will work with is: *How can teachers build pedagogy that engages the lifeworlds of their students and that enables success?*

We hope this generative question will be the basis for a whole range of classroom action research projects. The quality of the research question often determines the outcome so it's important to spent time thinking about the question. It needs to be one that represents your inquiry into something that you really don't know in advance. Otherwise why do the research. The question needs to be a real inquiry into practice.

Has a well defined clear research problem/question

The quality of action research projects are in large part determined by the thoughtfulness of the research problem/question. In the spirit of inquiry, you want a question in which you don't know the answer.

Systematic examination involving collection and analysis of evidence/data

What distinguishes action research from daily reflection by teachers about their teaching is the demand for systematic examination of evidence/
artefacts/data. This can take the form of journals, student artefacts from classroom learning, video, audio, questionnaires, records, interviews, …

The sort of rigorous reflection that is required demands some artefacts that can be analysed and thought about at some time after the lesson. Memory is not enough.

Producing your own knowledge about what works in your context

Because action research is focusing on your own practice then it aims to produce knowledge about what works in your own context. As such in the first instance, you're interested in the intricacies of your own situation and not the need to generalise. Many teachers have developed very sophisticated knowledge about practices that work in their context: action research provides an opportunity to document this knowledge and examine how it might be further improved.

Collaborative and professional community building

Good action research works to undermine the privatism that depowers teachers and that impedes redesigning teaching practice. The Research Roundtables and project working groups aim to provide a context for professional community building.

Making the ordinary 'extra-ordinary'

Many experienced teachers treat their quite complex theory and practice as ordinary, even mundane. Its what you do everyday! But then teaching is a very complex practice—it's quite extraordinary— and action research provides a process to reveal some of the complexity in ways that can be examined, modified, documented, redesigned.

Conclusion

We have provided an Action Research Planning Template to guide your action research projects. To have a productive experience we recommend:

- spend adequate time in the design phase of the project getting your question 'right'
- plan to collect data that works for that question
- make it manageable
- work on setting up the conducive conditions you need
- get time for thoughtful analysis of your data
- think about your data through your question
- push your analysis for implications
- work with other teachers

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