Action research

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Action research. In this article we explore the development of some different traditions of action research and provide an introductory guide to the literature.

Contents: <u>introduction</u> · <u>origins</u> · <u>the decline and rediscovery of action research</u> · <u>conclusion</u> · <u>further reading</u> · <u>how to cite this article</u>. see, also: <u>research for practice</u>.

In the literature, discussion of action research tends to fall into two distinctive camps. The British tradition – especially that linked to education – tends to view action research as research oriented toward the enhancement of direct practice. For example, Carr and Kemmis provide a classic definition:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

Many people are drawn to this understanding of action research because it is firmly located in the realm of the practitioner – it is tied to self-reflection. As a way of working it is very close to the notion of reflective practice coined by Donald Schön (1983).

The second tradition, perhaps more widely approached within the social welfare field – and most certainly the broader understanding in the USA is of action research as 'the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change' (Bogdan and Biklen 1992: 223). Bogdan and Biklen continue by saying that its practitioners marshal evidence or data to expose unjust practices or environmental dangers and recommend actions for change. In many respects, for them, it is linked into traditions of citizen's action and community organizing. The practitioner is actively involved in the cause for which the research is conducted. For others, it is such commitment is a necessary part of being a practitioner or member of a community of practice. Thus, various projects designed to enhance practice within youth work, for example, such as the detached work reported on by Goetschius and Tash (1967) could be talked of as action research.

Origins

Kurt Lewin is generally credited as the person who coined the term 'action research':

> The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948: 202-3)

His approach involves a spiral of steps, 'each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action' (*ibid.*: 206). The basic cycle involves the following:
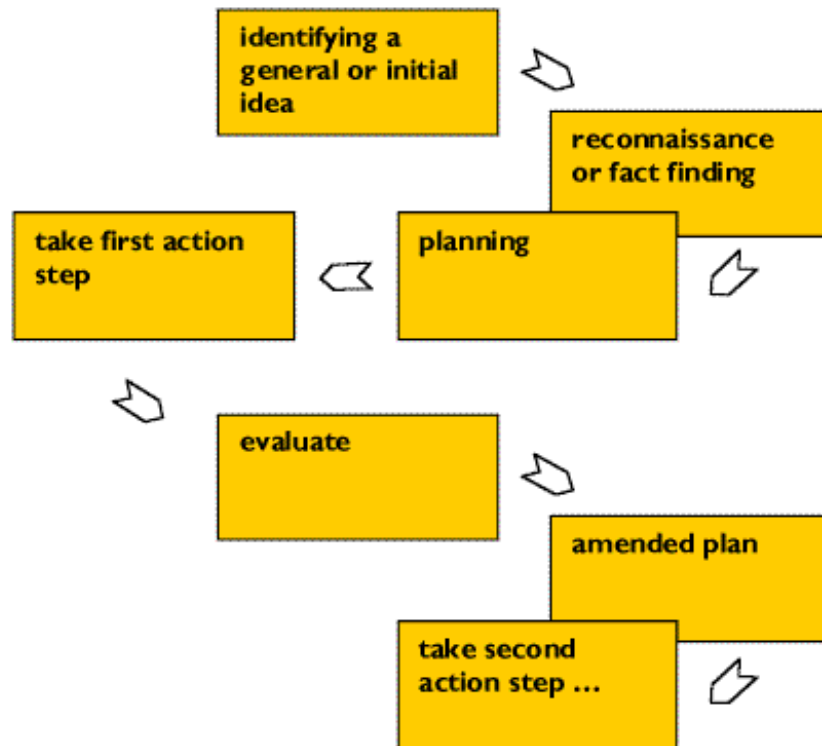
This is how Lewin describes the initial cycle:

> The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means available. Frequently more fact-finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, "an overall plan" of how to reach the objective and secondly, a decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea. (*ibid.*: 205)

The next step is 'composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan' (*ibid.*: 206). What we can see here is an approach to research that is oriented to problem-solving in social and organizational settings, and that has a form that parallels **Dewey's** conception of learning from experience.

The approach, as presented, does take a fairly sequential form – and it is open to literal interpretation. Following it can lead to practice that is 'correct' rather than 'good' – as we will see. It can also be argued that model itself places insufficient emphasis on analysis at key points. Elliott (1991: 70), for example, believed that the basic model allows those who use it to assume that the 'general idea' can be fixed in advance, 'that "reconnaissance" is merely fact-finding, and that "implementation" is a fairly straightforward process'. As might be expected there was some questioning as to whether this was 'real' research. There were questions around action research's partisan nature – the fact that it served particular causes.

The decline and rediscovery of action research

Action research did suffer a decline in favour during the 1960s because of its association with radical political activism (Stringer 2007: 9). There were, and are, questions concerning its rigour, and the training of those undertaking it. However, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992: 223) point out, research is a frame of mind – 'a perspective that people take toward objects and activities'. Once we have satisfied ourselves that the collection of information is systematic, and that any interpretations made have a proper regard for satisfying truth claims, then much of the critique aimed at action research disappears. In some of Lewin's earlier work on action research (e.g. Lewin and Grabbe 1945) there was a tension between providing a rational basis for change through research, and the recognition that individuals are constrained in their ability to change by their cultural and social perceptions, and the systems of which they are a part. Having 'correct knowledge' does not of itself lead to change, attention also needs to be paid to the 'matrix of cultural and psychic forces' through which the subject is constituted (Winter 1987: 48).

Subsequently, action research has gained a significant foothold both within the realm of community-based, and participatory action research; and as a form of practice oriented to the improvement of educative encounters (e.g. Carr and Kemmis 1986).

> *Exhibit 1: Stringer on community-based action research*

> A fundamental premise of community-based action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolving problems that confront them….

> Community-based action research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values. In modern, democratic social contexts, it is seen as a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

> • It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people.

> • It is *equitable*, acknowledging people's equality of worth.

> • It is *liberating*, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.

> • It is *life enhancing*, enabling the expression of people's full human potential.

> (Stringer 1999: 9-10)

> ***The action research process*** works through three basic phases:

> **Look** -building a picture and gathering information. When evaluating we define and describe the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set. We also describe what all the participants (educators, group members, managers etc.) have been doing.

> **Think** – interpreting and explaining. When evaluating we analyse and interpret the situation. We reflect on what participants have been doing. We look at areas of success and any deficiencies, issues or problems.

> **Act** – resolving issues and problems. In evaluation we judge the worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities. We act to formulate solutions to any problems. (Stringer 1999: 18; 43-44;160)

The use of action research to deepen and develop classroom practice has grown into a strong tradition of practice (one of the first examples being the work of Stephen Corey in 1949). For some there is an insistence that action research must be collaborative and entail groupwork.

> Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out… The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members. (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 5-6)

Just why it must be collective is open to some question and debate (Webb 1996), but there is an important point here concerning the commitments and orientations of those involved in action research.

Conclusion

One of the legacies Kurt Lewin left us is the 'action research spiral' – and with it there is the danger that action research becomes little more than a procedure. It is a mistake, according to McTaggart (1996: 248) to think that following the action research spiral constitutes 'doing action research'. He continues, 'Action research is not a 'method' or a 'procedure' for research but a series of commitments to observe and problematize through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry'. It is his argument that Lewin has been misunderstood or, rather, misused. When set in historical context, while Lewin does talk about action research as a method, he is stressing a contrast between this form of interpretative practice and more traditional empirical-analytic research. The notion of a spiral may be a useful teaching device – but it is all too easily to slip into using it as *the* template for practice (McTaggart 1996: 249).

Further reading

This select, annotated, bibliography has been designed to give a flavour of the possibilities of action research and includes some useful guides to practice. As ever, if you have suggestions about areas or specific texts for inclusion, I'd like to hear from you.

Explorations of action research

Atweh, B., Kemmis, S. and Weeks, P. (eds.) (1998) *Action Research in Practice: Partnership for Social Justice in Education,* London: Routledge. Presents a collection of stories from action research projects in schools and a university. The book begins with theme chapters discussing action research, social justice and partnerships in research. The case study chapters cover topics such as: school environment – how to make a school a healthier place to be; parents – how to involve them more in decision-making; students as action researchers; gender – how to promote gender equity in schools; writing up action research projects.

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical. Education, knowledge and action research*, Lewes: Falmer. Influential book that provides a good account of 'action research' in education. Chapters on teachers, researchers and curriculum; the natural scientific view of educational theory and practice; the interpretative view of educational theory and practice; theory and practice – redefining the problem; a critical approach to theory and practice; towards a critical educational science; action research as critical education science; educational research, educational reform and the role of the profession.

Carson, T. R. and Sumara, D. J. (ed.) (1997) *Action Research as a Living Practice*, New York: Peter Lang. 140 pages. Book draws on a wide range of sources to develop an understanding of action research. Explores action research as a lived practice, 'that asks the researcher to not only investigate the subject at hand but, as well, to provide some account of the way in which the investigation both shapes and is shaped by the investigator.

Dadds, M. (1995) *Passionate Enquiry and School Development. A story about action research*, London: Falmer. 192 + ix pages. Examines three action research studies undertaken by a teacher and how they related to work in school – how she did the research, the problems she experienced, her feelings, the impact on her feelings and ideas, and some of the outcomes. In his introduction, John Elliot comments that the book is 'the most readable, thoughtful, and detailed study of the potential of action-research in professional education that I have read'.

Ghaye, T. and Wakefield, P. (eds.) *CARN Critical Conversations. Book one: the role of the self in action*, Bournemouth: Hyde Publications. 146 + xiii pages. Collection of five pieces from the Classroom Action Research Network. Chapters on: dialectical forms; graduate medical education – research's outer limits; democratic education; managing action research; writing up.

McNiff, J. (1993) *Teaching as Learning: An Action Research Approach*, London: Routledge. Argues that educational knowledge is created by individual teachers as they attempt to express their own values in their professional lives. Sets out familiar action research model: identifying a problem, devising, implementing and evaluating a solution and modifying practice. Includes advice on how working in this way can aid the professional development of action researcher and practitioner.

Quigley, B. A. and Kuhne, G. W. (eds.) (1997)*Creating Practical Knowledge Through Action Research,* San Fransisco: Jossey Bass.Guide to action research that outlines the action research process, provides a project planner, and presents examples to show how action research can yield improvements in six different settings, including a hospital, a university and a literacy education program.

Plummer, G. and Edwards, G. (eds.) *CARN Critical Conversations. Book two: dimensions of action research – people, practice and power*, Bournemouth: Hyde Publications. 142 + xvii pages. Collection of five pieces from the Classroom Action Research Network. Chapters on: exchanging letters and collaborative research; diary writing; personal and professional learning – on teaching and self knowledge; anti-racist approaches; psychodynamic group theory in action research.

Whyte, W. F. (ed.) (1991) *Participatory Action Research*, Newbury Park: Sage. 247 pages. Chapters explore the development of participatory action research and its relation with action science; and examines its usages in various agricultural and industrial settings

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) (1996) *New Directions in Action Research*, London; Falmer Press. 266 + xii pages. Useful collection that explores principles and procedures for critical action research; problems and suggested solutions; and postmodernism and critical action research.

Action research guides

Coghlan, D. and Brannick, D. (2000) *Doing Action Research in your own Organization,* London: Sage. 128 pages. Popular introduction. Part one covers the basics of action research including the action research cycle, the role of the 'insider' action researcher and the complexities of undertaking action research within your own organisation. Part two looks at the implementation of the action research project (including managing internal politics and the ethics and politics of action research). New edition due late 2004.

Elliot, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*, Buckingham: Open University Press. 163 + x pages Collection of various articles written by Elliot in which he develops his own particular interpretation of action research as a form of teacher professional development. In some ways close to a form of 'reflective practice'. Chapter 6, 'A practical guide to action research' – builds a staged model on Lewin's work and on developments by writers such as Kemmis.

Johnson, A. P. (2007) *A short guide to action research* 3e. Allyn and Bacon. Popular step by step guide for master's work.

Macintyre, C. (2002) *The Art of the Action Research in the Classroom*, London: David Fulton. 138 pages. Includes sections on action research, the role of literature, formulating a research question, gathering data, analysing data and writing a dissertation. Useful and readable guide for students.

McNiff, J., Whitehead, J., Lomax, P. (2003) *You and Your Action Research Project*, London: Routledge. Practical guidance on doing an action research project.Takes the practitioner-researcher through the various stages of a project. Each section of the book is supported by case studies

Stringer, E. T. (2007) *Action Research: A handbook for practitioners 3e*, Newbury Park, ca.: Sage. 304 pages. Sets community-based action research in context and develops a model. Chapters on information gathering, interpretation, resolving issues; legitimacy etc. See, also Stringer's (2003) *Action Research in Education*, Prentice Hall.

Winter, R. (1989) *Learning From Experience. Principles and practice in action research*, Lewes: Falmer Press. 200 + 10 pages. Introduces the idea of action research; the basic process; theoretical issues; and provides six principles for the conduct of action research. Includes examples of action research. Further chapters on from principles to practice; the learner's experience; and research topics and personal interests.

Action research in informal education

Usher, R., Bryant, I. and Johnston, R. (1997) *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge. Learning beyond the limits*, London: Routledge. 248 + xvi pages. Has some interesting chapters that relate to action research: on reflective practice; changing paradigms and traditions of research; new approaches to research; writing and learning about research.

Other references

Bogdan, R. and Biklen, S. K. (1992) *Qualitative Research For Education*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Goetschius, G. and Tash, J. (1967) *Working with the Unattached*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

McTaggart, R. (1996) 'Issues for participatory action researchers' in O. Zuber-Skerritt (ed.) *New Directions in Action Research*, London: Falmer Press.

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