



An Introduction to Action Research For the Purposes of Quality Enhancement Planning

"Action Research is a systematic form of inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry." (McCutcheon, G. & Jung, B., 1990). *Alternative perspectives on action research. Theory into Practice* 29 (3): 144-151). For the purposes of Quality Enhancement Planning, Action Research (AR) involves critical reflection regarding local questions, problems or challenges. Action implies that the practitioners will be acting as the collectors of data, the analysts, and the interpreters of results. AR is a process designed to empower all participants in the educational process (students, instructors and other parties) with the means to improve practices, outcomes and experiences and to improve, directly or indirectly, student learning.

Action Research is known by many other names, including participatory research and collaborative inquiry. AR is *learning by doing*: a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, review and reflect, and keep the cycle of assessment to improve learning going.

The Essential Steps

1. At the beginning, an "exploratory stance is adopted"; a deeper understanding of a problem or question is gained through observation, data or dialogue.
2. The next step involves defining the variables, specifying the question and targeting an outcome. With these pieces in place, an action plan can be developed.
3. As the plan/intervention is being implemented, observations and data are collected in various forms, and all participants are included by communicating about the purpose of the intervention and the targeted outcome.
4. After a designated period of time (stated in the action plan), results are collected, and interpreted. Based on these interpretations, participants engage in reflection and feedback, and an evidence based decision (EBD) is made. The EBD can inform current practices and/or lead to further questions that need to be addressed. In this way the cycle of Action Research is continued.

Five Phases of Action Research - Adapted from the St. Louis Action Research Evaluation Committee*

Phase I - Problem Identification:

- Why do you want to do it? Is it an important and practical problem, something worth your time and effort, something that could be beneficial to you, your students or others?
- Is the problem stated clearly and in the form of a question? Is it broad enough to allow for a range of insights and findings? Is it narrow enough to be manageable within your timeframe and your daily work?

Phase II - Plan of Action

- Will you develop and implement a new strategy or approach to address your question? If so, what will it be?
- Will you focus your study on existing practices? If so, which particular ones?
- What is an appropriate timeline for what you are trying to accomplish?
- Do you have stated, targeted outcomes?

Phase III - Data Collection

- What types of data should you try to collect in order to answer your question?
- How will you ensure that you have multiple perspectives?
- What resources exist and what information from others might be useful in helping you to frame your question, decide on types of data to collect, or to help you interpret your findings?

Phase IV - Analysis of Data

- What can you learn from the data? What patterns, insights, and new understandings can you find?
- What meaning do these patterns, insights, and new understandings have for your practice, or for your students?

Phase V - Plan for Future Action

- What will you do differently in your classroom or program as a result of this study?
- What might you recommend to others?
- How will you write about what you have learned so that the findings will be useful to you and to others?

Gathering Data

Action Research is more of a holistic approach to problem-solving, rather than a single method for collecting and analyzing data. Listed below are several techniques for gathering data commonly used in AR:

1. **Interviews** with constituencies
2. **Checklists** of skills, behaviors, abilities, timing, procedures, interactions, resources

3. **Portfolios** of a range of work from students of different abilities around a particular topic; a representation of a total experience; a collection of documents for analysis
4. **Individual files** of students' work (e.g., tapes, samples of work, art work, memos, photos of models/projects, reports), of students' opinions; of student attitudes, of students' experiences
5. **Diaries/journals** written by faculty, students, staff, or class groups
6. **Anecdotal notes** - informal notes written by a teacher
7. **Logs or minutes** of meetings, sessions, material used
8. **Student-teacher discussion/interaction** - records of comments and thoughts generated by students
9. **Questionnaires** of attitudes, opinions, preferences, information
10. **Audiotapes** of meetings, focus groups, discussions in class or about data gathered, games, group work, interviews, whole class groups, monologues, readings, lectures, demonstrations
11. **Videotapes** of classrooms, lessons, groups, demonstrations
12. **Time-on-task analysis** of students, instructors, procedures
13. **Case study** - a comprehensive picture/study of a student or a group of students

What Action Research Is Not

The following is adapted from "An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research" by Rory O'Brien (1998), Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, obrienr@fis.utoronto.ca

1. It is **not** the usual things instructors do when they think about their teaching. Action Research is systematic and involves collecting evidence on which to base rigorous reflection.
2. It is **not** just problem-solving. Action Research involves problem-posing, not just problem-solving. It does **not** start from a view of problems as pathologies. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the environments of the post secondary institution and the complicated learning tasks that students face by changing it and then learning how to improve it from the impacts of those changes.
3. It is **not** research on other people. Action Research is research by particular people on their own work to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others. Action Research does **not** treat people as objects. It treats people as autonomous, responsible agents who participate actively in making their own histories by knowing what they are doing.
4. It is **not** the scientific method applied to teaching. Action Research is **not** just about hypothesis-testing or about using data to come to conclusions. It is concerned with changing situations, not just interpreting them. It takes the researcher into view. Action Research is a systematically-evolving process of changing both the researcher and the situations in which he or she works.

MacIsaac, Dan (1996). "[An Introduction to Action Research](http://www.physics.nau.edu/~danmac)" (<http://www.physics.nau.edu/~danmac>)

O'Brien, Rory (1998). "An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research", obrienr@fis.utoronto.ca

Gabel, Dorothy (1995) Presidential Address, National association for Research in Science Teaching, San Francisco,

* This source was retrieved from www.emtech.net/actionresearch.htm.

See also

Dick, B. (2002) action research: action and research (online)

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.htm>

Dick, B. and Swepson, P. (1997). Action research FAQ (online) <http://scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq>