

# Daily Classroom Improvement with Action Research

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“My fifth period class bounces off the walls. They are the rowdiest class that I have ever had. How can I keep that class on track?”

All teachers face a “fifth period” occasionally. Our challenge is to work through this difficult classroom situation to achieve effective teaching and learning! But that is often not easy to do. If we can’t identify the root cause of the problem, changing it is unlikely. We ask ourselves, “What can be done to improve classroom management and effect positive student learning?”

Action Research may be the answer. When the topic of research is presented to many agriculture teachers you may get a roll of the eyes, a quick attempt to change the subject, or even a quick exit! Agriculture teachers often believe they are so busy participating in school activities, FFA activities, classroom instruction, and all of their other responsibilities that research would be too difficult and time-consuming to conduct. But what if the agriculture teacher could combine teaching and research? Action research makes that connection.

What is action research? It is an approach to introducing problem identification, action planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection into your teaching (Johnson, 1993). Action research is a learning process that allows learning and creation of knowledge through critical reflection on experiences, forming abstract concepts, and testing the implications of these con-

cepts in new situations (Johnson, 1993). Simply put, it is a way of scientifically examining the way we teach and how we can do it better, for positive student outcomes – we learn by doing!

In a practical sense, action research helps us to evaluate our teaching methods and curriculum as well as our efforts to respond to our student’s educational needs.

Can you answer yes to any of the following questions?

- Do you want your students to perform better?
- Do you think about making changes to your style of teaching?
- Do you wonder why your students act and behave the way they do?
- Do you talk about teaching with your colleagues?
- Is classroom management a concern?
- Do you wish students enjoyed being in your classroom?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, action research could be the solution. The answer lies in following the six steps.

## **Step 1: Pick an area of question.**

Let’s address the following question. “Why do my fifth period students come into class everyday bouncing off the walls?” Now that you know what you are trying to solve, working through it will be much easier because now you can focus on an issue and not a broad topic like class management. You won’t just be saying, “my fifth period class is horrible” you will be saying, “my fifth period class is very lively when it comes into the room.” There is a big

difference. If you can control this class when they first come into your classroom it may change the entire class period.

## **Step 2: Find out what others have to say about your question.**

This involves doing some investigation. The best way to do this is to read up on what others say about your question. For our example you might read, “The First Days of School” by Wong and Wong (1998). This book discusses why students may enter classrooms in “hyper” mode. You might need to read up on what time of day has to do with the way students are acting. In some arenas you might call step two the “review of literature.” During this step you can also seek assistance and insight from other teachers, administration, or even the Internet.

## **Step 3: Gather any and all information you can.**

Start collecting data on your class and the problem that you are studying. Count the instances, occurrences, individuals, and events that surround your problem. Arrange the information that you gather by grade level, classes, etc. As you collect the data, write it in the form of a diary or journal. Sometimes just by seeing the information in another format allows you to get a new perspective on your problem. You might consider audio taping or video recording your class. During this step, you could also gather information directly from your students through a questionnaire. You may interview your students or even have an internal class focus group.

When gathering information, at-

tempt to identify all of the reasons that could lead to the problem. For example, determine where fifth period falls during a student's day. Is it right after lunch or a break? Are the students coming into class after physical education? Are "leaders" encouraging the disruptive behavior? What do the students do as they enter the class until the bell rings? Gather as much information about the problem as you can.

#### ***Step 4: Make a plan for change.***

This step is used to create an action research plan. In this plan you need to restate the research question, the benefits of answering this question, and who is going to be involved in solving your problem. If you think it would be helpful, consult an outside source or colleague. Develop a plan that includes a method of intervention.

Using our example, our action plan might include benefits such as more time on task for the students, less class disruptions, increased student learning, and better test scores. Possibly invite a mentor teacher to come and watch the student behavior and offer insight. Interventions might include taking the first five minutes of class to have open discussion about what is on the student's minds. Incentives developed by the students might motivate the class to cooperate with you.

#### ***Step 5: Set a timeline.***

Create a step-by-step time plan of actions and intervention(s). Establish times that allow for evaluation and monitoring. This could be a day, a week, or a month. Identify components of your project that you can measure to determine success. You might have your fifth period class come into the room and go directly to their seats. Set up a timeline that establishes successful accomplishment of this goal within one week.

If students demonstrate this behavior within one week, you are successful in your first goal! In two weeks you might want your students to be seated with their notebooks open and writing a pre-lesson warm up activity. In three weeks your class might be journal writing, etc. It is imperative that you set timelines for each of your activities to determine your level of success. Scheduling will lead you to the sixth and most important step.

#### ***Step 6: Reflect.***

The final step is to reflect on what has been accomplished. How has the situation changed? Is your problem solved? Have you seen positive results? Do you need more time? Do you need to start over? Is fifth period now one of my best classes? Is fifth period still bouncing off the walls? Or, fifth period is a little better, but perhaps they just need some more time. Is it time to start with a new question? Don't be afraid to do the process again.

Why should I get involved with action research? The reason is simple, if as a teacher you are dissatisfied with what is happening in your classroom, or you simply want to become a better teacher, action research can change it. You won't be satisfied with the status quo. Action research offers a possible solution to many of teaching's most difficult questions.

#### ***References***

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