

Seven Steps for Improving Teaching Through Action Research

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There are different ways of doing research. It could be argued that some methods are more useful in particular contexts. However, certain processes and procedures are common to all kinds of research. It is these processes and procedures that qualify research as research and not just ad hoc activity. Good action research shares the basic characteristics of all good research, but it also has its own special characteristics. According to McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead (1996) the linking of the terms action and research highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a mean of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge.

Action research shares the following characteristics with other research:

- ◆ it leads to knowledge
- ◆ it provides evidence to support this knowledge
- ◆ it makes explicit the process of enquiry through which knowledge emerges
- ◆ it links new knowledge with existing knowledge

Action research is different from other research because:

- ◆ it requires action as an integral part of the research process itself

- ◆ it is focused by the researcher's professional values rather than methodological considerations
- ◆ it is necessarily insider research in the sense of practitioners researching their own professional actions

Action research is useful in "real" concrete situations. It is useful where change and understanding is sought in a situation in which it is usually too difficult to control variables because the situation is "concrete", complex, and on-going. Action provides change and research provides understanding. Atwen, Kemmis & Weeks (1998) refer to action research methodology as a cycle progression from fuzzy questions through fuzzy methods to fuzzy answers to less fuzzy questions, methods and answers.

Action research is used extensively on pre-and in-service programs of professional education, particularly teacher education. In recent times its scope has broadened to include other professions, such as health, service professions, civil and military services, as well as other contexts as the basis for participatory action in bringing about social reform and cultural renewal; and is embraced as a valuable form of personal and social development for young people and adults in school and community contexts.

Agricultural educators can use action research to improve their professional practices in many different types of workplaces. The agricultural educator acts as a practitioner in order to make a deliberate intention to intervene in his own practice to bring about improvement. Unlike the conventional positivistic research paradigm, action research question begins with: "How

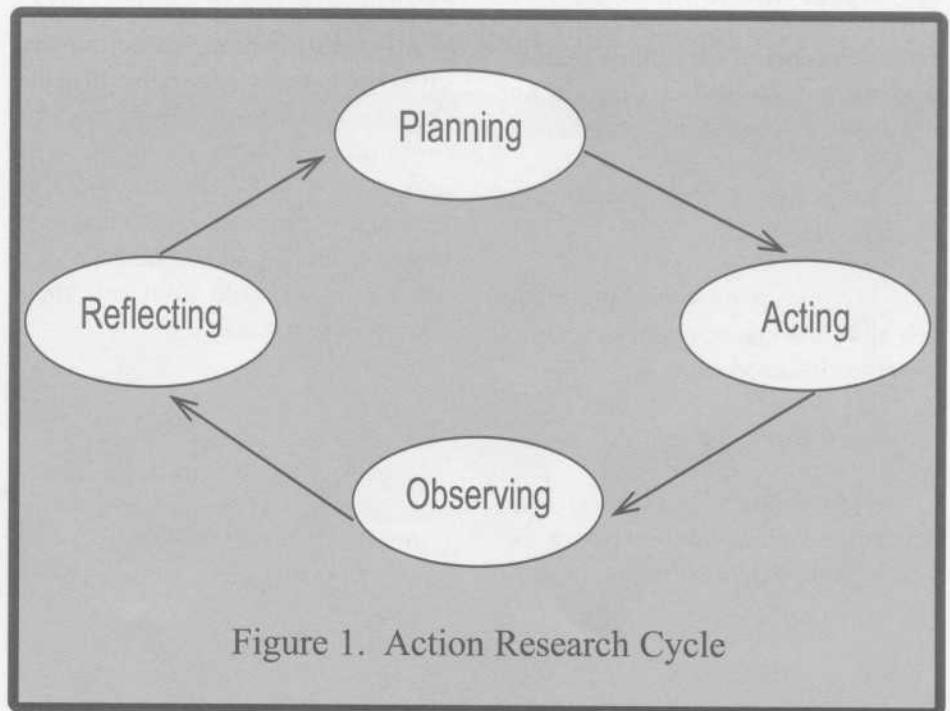


Figure 1. Action Research Cycle

can I improve...?, because action research should be about your action, not the action of others.

Researchers have described the processes of action research in different ways, and produced various diagrams and models to represent them (George, 1996). A significant feature of action research that everyone agrees about is that it operates in cycles. The action research cycle or spiral is sometimes used as a way of representing action research. Its essential features are the cyclical moments of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Figure 1).

How can teachers of agriculture practice action research?

In the following paragraph, we will provide a practical guide for teachers of agriculture to benefit from action research in their professional career. To make the action research model in figure (1) more applicable, we will use a hypothetical situation and break down the model into a seven step procedure:

Step one: Identify a situation that needs improvement

A teacher of agriculture realizes that students in his/her class do not participate in class discussions.

Step two: Check literature to identify solutions

He/she reviews teaching methods and class management techniques to solve his/her problem.

Step three: Program of action

He/she decides to use different teaching techniques in order to increase students' participation in class activities.

Step four: How each action will

be evaluated

He/she will decide to use observation techniques in order to evaluate his action research project.

Step five: Perform action

He/she will utilize the new teaching techniques during the next a few classes

Step six: Review

He/she evaluates students' participation and makes any adjustments deemed necessary.

Step seven: Repeat steps 4-6

Conclusion

You might say that you already do action research, that many aspects of good professional practice and ways of working that you already use are a form of action research. You probably often reflect on your practice and change it in the light of what you learn. However, good professional practice emphasizes the action but does not always question the motives for the action. To be action research, there must be praxis rather than practice. Praxis is informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge rather than just successful action. It is informed because other people's views are taken into account. It is committed and intentional in terms of values that have been examined and can be argued. It leads to knowledge from and about educational practice.

References

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