

# Part I

## What Do I Need To Know?

Action research is about practitioners creating new ideas about how to improve practice, and putting those ideas forward as their personal theories of practice. This is different from traditional social science, which is about official researchers producing theory, which practitioners apply to their practice, so immediately we are into a context of power and politics around the struggle for knowledge and recognition as a knower.

Part I provides the setting for a discussion of these ideas. It contains the following chapters.

**Chapter 1 What is action research?**

**Chapter 2 Who does action research?**

**Chapter 3 The underpinning assumptions of action research**

**Chapter 4 Where did action research come from?**

We said in the Introduction that you could regard working with the ideas in this book as your own action enquiry into how you can learn about action research and how to do it. At this point in your action–reflection cycle you are asking, ‘What is my concern?’ You are articulating the idea that you need to find out what the core ideas of action research are, so that you have a firm grasp of the basics in order to begin an action enquiry from an informed position.



# 1

## What Is Action Research?

The action research family is wide and diverse, so inevitably different people say different things about what action research is, what it is for, and who can do it and how. You need to know about these issues, so that you can take an active part in the debates. Taking part also helps you to get to grips with why you should do action research and what you can hope to achieve.

This chapter is organized into four sections that deal with these issues.

- 1 What action research is and is not
- 2 Different approaches to action research
- 3 Purposes of action research
- 4 When to use action research and when not

### **1 WHAT ACTION RESEARCH IS AND IS NOT**

Action research is a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, 'What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?' Their accounts of practice show how they are trying to improve their own learning, and influence the learning of others. These accounts come to stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish (see McNiff and Whitehead 2002).

Action research has become increasingly popular around the world as a form of professional learning. It has been particularly well developed in education, specifically in teaching, and is now used widely across the professions. One of the attractions about action research is that everyone can do it, so it is for 'ordinary' practitioners as well as principals, managers and administrators. Students can also do, and should do, action research (Steinberg and Kincheloe 1998). You can gain university accreditation for your action enquiries. Case studies appear in this book from action researchers who never thought when they began their enquiries that they would get their masters and doctoral degrees.

Action research can be a powerful and liberating form of professional enquiry because it means that practitioners themselves investigate their own practice as they find ways of living more fully in the direction of their educational values. They are not told what to do. They decide for themselves what to do, in negotiation with others. This can work in relation to individual and also collective enquiries. More and more groups of practitioners are getting together to investigate their collective work and put their stories of learning into the public domain. Your story can add to that collection and strengthen it.

This is what makes action research distinctive. It is done by practitioners themselves rather than a professional researcher, who does research on practitioners, as is often the case in traditional forms of social science research. Social scientists tend to stand outside a situation and ask, 'What are those people over there doing? How do we understand and explain what they are doing?' This kind of research is often called spectator research, and is usually outsider research. Action researchers, however, are insider researchers. They see themselves as part of the situation they are investigating, and ask, individually and collectively, 'Is my/our work going as we wish? How do we improve it where necessary?' If they feel their work is already reasonably satisfactory, they evaluate it to show why they believe this to be the case. If they feel something needs improving, they work on that aspect, keeping records and producing regular oral and written progress reports about what they are doing.

Here are some examples of social science questions and action research questions to show the difference between them.

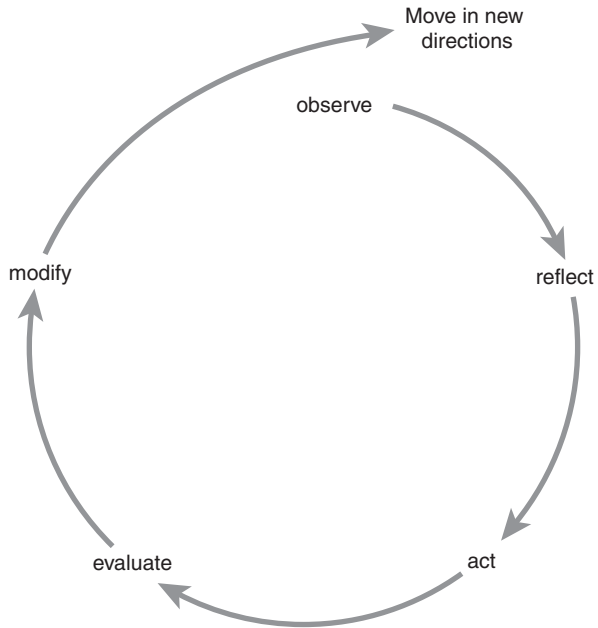
<b>Social science questions</b>	<b>Action research questions</b>
What is the relationship between teacher motivation and teacher retention?	How do I influence the quality of teachers' experience in school, so that they decide to stay?
Does management style influence worker productivity?	How do I improve my management style to encourage productivity?
Will a different seating arrangement increase audience participation?	How do I encourage greater audience participation through trying out different seating arrangements?

Action research aims to be a disciplined, systematic process. A notional action plan is:

- take stock of what is going on
- identify a concern
- think of a possible way forward
- try it out
- monitor the action by gathering data to show what is happening
- evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what is happening

- test the validity of accounts of learning
- modify practice in the light of the evaluation.

(This is a modified version of the plan in McNiff et al. 2003.)



**FIGURE 1.1** An action–reflection cycle

In your action enquiry you would identify something of concern, try a different way of doing things, reflect on what was happening, and in the light of your reflections try a new way that may or may not be more successful. For example, Caitríona McDonagh (2000) tried out different reading programmes for her children with reading difficulties, none of which seemed to help. She realized that she had to change her pedagogies and teach in a way that helped the children to learn. Geoff Mead (2001) tells of his professional learning in the police service, where he transformed personal and institutional constraints into a context in which he could theorize police leadership as an inclusive, holistic practice.

The process of ‘observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions’ is generally known as action–reflection, although no single term is used in the literature. Because the process tends to be cyclical, it is often referred to as an action–reflection cycle (Figure 1.1). The process is ongoing because as soon as we reach a provisional point where we feel things are satisfactory, that point itself raises new questions and it is time to begin again. Good visual models exist in the literature to communicate this process (for example Elliott 1991).

## 2 DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ACTION RESEARCH

Different approaches have emerged within the action research family. While all action researchers ask questions about influencing processes of change, different perspectives ask different kinds of questions. To appreciate the differences, we need to go back to the idea mentioned above of outsider and insider research.

Throughout the twentieth century, new forms of enquiry became established. A shift took place in some quarters, away from a positivist view towards an interpretive view. Positivism held that the world was a 'thing', separate from an observer. It was possible to observe and comment on the world in an objective, value-free way. In the same way, knowledge was a 'thing', separate from a knower, so it was possible also to comment on knowledge in an objective, value-free way. This view led to a tradition in which the world and its phenomena could be studied, experimented with and analysed, and outcomes could be predicted and controlled by manipulating variables in the form of objects, people and practices.

The emergent interpretive tradition, however, held that people were part of and created their own reality, so it did not make sense to see the world as separate from the people who inhabited it, or practices as separate from the people who were doing them. Rather than study the world and practices as separate phenomena, the focus shifted to understanding how people interacted with one another and their environment. In many instances, the focus in the physical sciences has shifted over time to understanding how the world can be sustained, and in the social sciences to how personal and social practices interact with one another so that people can sustain their own life practices, and, in some cases, come to understand how these can contribute to sustaining the planet itself. The purpose of much research therefore has shifted from a wish to control the environment and human practices by imposing change from without to a commitment to understanding and improving the environment and human practices by changing them from within.

These different perspectives can be seen as influenced by the different values commitments of researchers themselves. People's values are part of their ontological perspectives. 'Ontology' means 'a theory of being', so how we perceive ourselves (our theory of being) can influence how we perceive others and our environment. If we perceive ourselves as discrete, self-contained identities, we will tend to see others as separate from us, whereas if we see ourselves as constantly creating our identities, we may come to see others as sharing our lives within a shared environment. This does not mean that we relinquish our uniqueness as individuals. Rather, we see ourselves as unique human beings who are inevitably in company with other unique human beings. Further, some people have come to see themselves as so deeply involved in the co-creation of new identities, and trying to understand how this process of transformative self-creation can come to influence how they can work collectively for sustainable

personal and collective wellbeing, that a distinct focus has emerged to do with how persons understand and accept their own responsibility for accounting for why they live as they do.

It has to be noted that some researchers still maintain a strictly positivist stance, while many others prefer to adopt a more reflective attitude. Lively debates take place in the literature to argue these different perspectives.

### **Ontological perspectives and boundaries**

An understanding of how ontological perspectives influence personal and social practices is essential to understanding different perspectives in action research.

Some action researchers maintain an almost exclusive self-perception as external researchers who are watching what other people are doing. They set up rigid boundaries that come to act as demarcations between themselves and others. Standing outside the situation, they observe other people doing action research and ask, 'What are those people doing? How can their practice be described? How can it be explained?'

Often, however, the researcher becomes involved in the situation, and can become an insider researcher. Sometimes the researcher gets so involved that they become a participant. Then they ask, 'What are we doing? How can our action be described and explained?' A good deal of participatory and collaborative action research adopts this perspective. The boundaries between people begin to dissolve, as people see themselves as united in a common endeavour to improve their own circumstances. However, this stance can be problematic in the reporting stage, because questions can arise about who tells the research story, whose voice is heard, and who speaks on behalf of whom. In much interpretive research, the researcher's voice is usually heard rather than the participants'. Participants are sometimes viewed as sources of data rather than as actors, so further questions arise about how power relationships are used, and why.

A new focus on self-study, which is the basis of this book, has emerged in recent times. Self-study places individual researchers at the centre of their own enquiries. Researchers ask, 'What am I doing? How do I describe and explain my actions to you?' The individual 'I' is always seen to exist in company with other individual 'I's', and each asks, 'How do I hold myself accountable to myself and to you?' The boundaries begin to dissolve, as researchers come to see themselves as sharing meanings, that is, developing a common understanding about what they are doing and why. Boundaries become permeable membranes (Capra 2003), where meanings and commitments flow between lives, and people perceive themselves not as separate entities, though still unique individuals, but as sharing the same life space as others (Rayner 2002; 2003; Whitehead 2005).

The idea of self-study has become popular worldwide, and many accounts show its potential for generating personal, organizational and social change.

For example, Jackie Delong, working as a superintendent in the Grand Erie District Board in Ontario, has done much to embed action research organizationally, so that all teachers have the opportunity of evaluating their work as the basis for their career-long learning pathways (Delong 2002); and Je Kan Adler-Collins, a nursing supervisor in the Faculty of Nursing in Fukuoka University, Japan, is developing a curriculum that encourages nursing practitioners to understand and improve their work (Adler-Collins 2004).

Ironically, some of the new self-study literature adopts a spectator approach. Some authors analyse self-study in an abstract way, rather than talk from the experience of their own self-studies. Other practitioners, however, show the reality of their self-studies by explaining what their values are and showing whether or not they are realizing them. Madeline Church (2004; Church et al. 2003), for example, a consultant in the development of evaluations in international networks, undertook her self-study to explore ways of developing the work of international networks as emancipatory processes that liberate individuals to work together for common educational processes; and Máirín Glenn (2003; 2004), a primary school teacher, investigated her learning as she helped children and colleagues to come to appreciate their capacity for original thinking and creativity.

Personal theories are especially powerful for sustainable educational change. Sustainable change happens when people create and implement their own ideas rather than only accept and implement the ideas of others. Existing power relationships between 'experts' and 'trainees' are demolished and more democratic forms of working developed. While an external researcher may make suggestions about what a practitioner may do, it is for the practitioner to make decisions and stand over them.

### **3 PURPOSES OF ACTION RESEARCH**

The purpose of all research is to generate new knowledge. Action research generates a special kind of knowledge.

Action research has always been understood as people taking action to improve their personal and social situations. Some see its potential for promoting a more productive and peaceful world order (Heron 1998; Heron and Reason 2001). A strong new theme is emerging about how action researchers can find more democratic ways of working for sustainable organizational development (McNiff and Whitehead 2000). Educational action research is coming to be seen as a methodology for real-world social change.

As noted, much educational research (and action research) is written about from a spectator perspective. Researchers offer conceptual analyses and explanations of action research and its possible uses, which tend to stay at the level of words. Mill (1985) said that such analyses often produce 'dead dogma'.



According to Mill, ideas that stay on a page remain lifeless, because they do not make the real-world link with action.

The potential of action research becomes real when ideas are linked with action. People can give meaning to their lives, because they stop talking about action research and start talking about themselves as action researchers. They communicate their ideas as theories of real-world practice, by explaining what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what they hope to achieve. These personal theories are also living theories, because they change and develop as people change and develop themselves. The purpose of action research is to generate living theories about how learning has improved practice and is informing new practices.

The best accounts show the transformation of practice into living theories. The individual practitioner asks, 'What am I doing? How do I understand it in order to improve it? How can I draw on ideas in the literature, and incorporate them into my own understanding? How do I transform these ideas into action?' Asking these questions can help practitioners to find practical ways of living in the direction of their educational and social values. Breda Long (2003) explains how she influenced people's understandings of processes of organizational change; and Alon Serper (2004) explains how he has come to understand his own ontological being in the world.

#### **4 WHEN TO USE ACTION RESEARCH AND WHEN NOT**

You can use action research for many purposes, but not for all.

##### **When to use action research**

Use action research when you want to evaluate whether what you are doing is influencing your own or other people's learning, or whether you need to do something different to ensure that it is. You may want to:

##### *Improve your understanding*

- Relations are strained in your workplace. How are you going to find out why, so that you can do something about it?
- Your students are achieving remarkably high scores. Why? Is it your teaching, their extra study, or a new classroom environment?

##### *Develop your learning*

- How do you learn to encourage people to be more positive?
- How do you learn to improve your own timekeeping?

*Influence others' learning*

- How do you help colleagues to develop more inclusive pedagogies?
- How do you encourage your senior management team partners to listen more carefully to employees?

**When not to use action research**

Do not use action research if you want to draw comparisons, show statistical correlations, or demonstrate a cause and effect relationship. For example:

- If you want to see whether adults who are accompanied by children are more likely to wait at pedestrian crossings than those who are not accompanied by children, you would do an observational study and include statistical analyses of a head count.
- If you want to see why some male teachers seem reluctant to teach relationships and sexuality education, you would probably do a survey and analyse the results. You may also possibly do a comparative analysis of results from your survey and one you have read about, which aims to find out which subjects teachers find most attractive.
- If you want to show the effects of good leadership on teaching motivation you could interview a sample of teachers and analyse their responses in terms of identified categories. You would probably also interview a sample of educational leaders and get their opinions on the relationship between their leadership and the quality of teachers' motivation.

These are social science topics where researchers ask questions such as, 'What are those people doing? What do they say? How many of them do it?' Action research questions, however, take the form, 'How do I understand what I am doing? How do I improve it?', and place the emphasis on the researcher's intent to take action for personal and social improvement.

We said in the Introduction that educational research should make room for all kinds of research and encourage interchange of ideas by researchers working in different traditions. One way is to show how living theories can draw on the findings of abstract spectator theories. 'How do I ...?' questions often incorporate questions of the form 'What is happening here?' (see page 15, for example).

This kind of fact-finding can often be the beginning of an action enquiry. John Elliott (1991) rightly calls it a reconnaissance phase. However, it is necessary to go beyond fact-finding and into action if real-world bullying is to stop or engaged reading begin.

<b>'How do I ...?' questions</b>	<b>'What is happening here?' questions</b>
How do I stop the bullying in my class?	How many children are being bullied? Who is bullying whom? Why are they bullying them?
How do I encourage my students to read?	What kind of books do my students read at present? How many categories of books are in the college library? How much time is given to independent reading in the curriculum?

## SUMMARY

This chapter has set out some core issues in action research. It has explained that, unlike social science, action research places the individual 'I' at the centre of an enquiry. Different forms of action research have emerged over the years, which prioritize different aspects. Action research can be useful when investigating how to improve learning and take social action. It is inappropriate for investigations that aim to draw comparisons or establish cause and effect relationships.

The next chapter deals with the interesting and contested question of who does action research, and who says.