

Thinking about...

Action Research

Action research is an approach that involves the practitioner as a researcher. It has two key aims: to improve the practitioner's professional practices and to improve his/her understanding of those practices. There are different versions of action research in terms of debates about its nature and focus, and in terms of the emphasis on methodology and values. The main element which distinguishes action research is not just the focus on practices but the fact that a needed improvement is identified, implemented and evaluated. As well as being concerned with practices and improvement it examines the effects, both positive and negative, of a particular intervention. Another key element is that the practitioner acts as the researcher. The research is not conducted by an outsider but by an insider (or insiders). It is also possible to engage students as co-researchers and involve them in all stages of the research process.

Process

- 1 Refine your current practice
 - 2 Identify an action you wish to improve
 - 3 Imagine a way forward in this
 - 4 Try it out
 - 5 Monitor and reflect on what happens
 - 6 Modify the plan in light of what has been found
 - 7 Evaluate the modified action
 - 8 Continue until you are satisfied (repeat the cycle)
- (McNiff, 2002; 71)

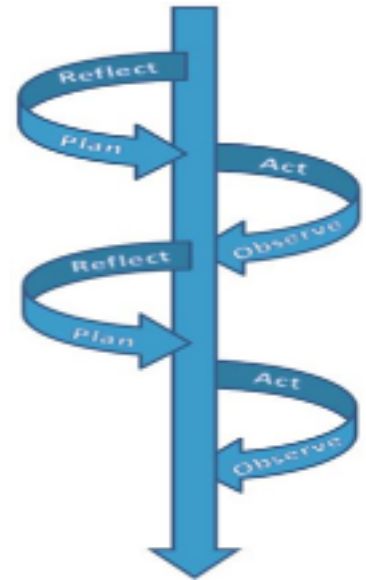
Strengths

- Strong focus on self-reflection and, often, values
- Aims to implement change or improvement
- Considered a democratic approach to research
- Action researchers have intimate knowledge and involvement in the context, people and processes (and have easy access to other people and resources)
- It is possible to engage students as co-researchers throughout the research process

Weaknesses

- Closeness to the context of research might lead to bias
- Threats to validity in research that involves participant observation (particularly where this is covert)
- Ethical issues (eg issue of informed consent)
- Criticised for lacking methodological rigour
- Concerns over reliability and whether findings can be generalised to other contexts

NB These criticisms can be challenged in interesting ways



Suggested reading

- McKernan, J. (1996). *Curriculum action research*, London: Routledge
- McNiff, J. (2009). *You and your action research project*, London: Routledge
- McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and writing action research*, London: Sage
- Norton, L. (2008). *Action research in teaching and learning: a practical guide to conducting pedagogical research in universities*, London: Routledge
- Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner, how professionals think in action*, New York: Basic Books
- Simons, H., Kushner, S., Jones, K. & James, D. (2003). *From evidence based practice to practice based evidence: the idea of situated generalisation*, *Research Papers in Education*, 18:4, 347-364