

Facilitator's Body of Knowledge Research Project

Action Research

Background: The origins of action research are clouded. Several authors believe that action research originated with Kurt Lewin, an American psychologist. While others believe this method of inquiry has evolved over the last century. A careful study of the literature shows convincingly that action research is a root derivative of the scientific method reaching back to the late nineteenth century.

Despite the clouded origins of action research, Kurt Lewin, in the mid 1940s constructed a theory, which described it as proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action. Lewin argued that in order to understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry.

Action research has been defined as:

A three-step spiral process of (1) planning which involves reconnaissance; (2) taking actions; and (3) fact-finding about the results of the action.
Kurt Lewin (1947)

The process by which practitioners attempt to study their problems scientifically in order to guide, correct, and evaluate their decisions and actions.
Stephen Corey (1953)

Action research is inquiry or research strategies in the context of focused efforts to understand and improve the quality of an organization and its performance in the context of specific social and organizational issues. It may start with an intellectual question or with a desire to make a practical contribution. It typically is designed and conducted by practitioners who analyze the data to improve their own practice. It can be

done by individuals or by teams of colleagues. The team approach is called *collaborative inquiry*.

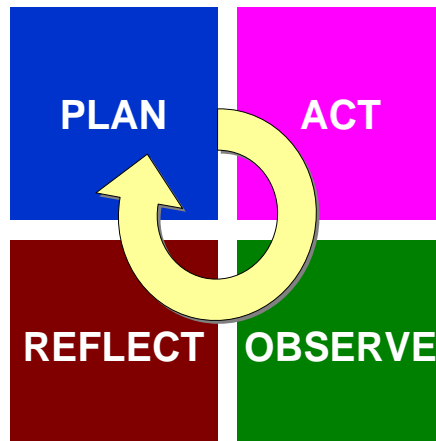
Action research projects cycle between action and reflection with various degrees of collaboration between researchers and organization members. These projects have four basic themes, empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge; and social change.

The process that the researcher goes through to achieve these themes is a spiral of action research cycles consisting of four major phrases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

There are three minimal requirements for action research. These requirements incorporate the goals of improvement and involvement which characterize any action research project. The conditions, which are set out as individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to exist, are:

1. the project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a strategic action susceptible to improvement;
2. the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; and
3. the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control of the process.

Types of Action Research



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Most authors describe three types of action research:

- Type 1: the scientific-technical view of problem solving; or a positivist perspective;
- Type 2: practical-deliberative; or an interpretivist perspective; and
- Type 3: emancipatory; or a critical science perspective.

Type 1: Scientific-Technical: This form of action research stems from a scientific method of problem solving. The underlying goal of the researcher is to test a particular intervention based on a specified theoretical framework. The researcher identifies the problem and a specific intervention, then the practitioner is involved agreeing to facilitate with the implementation of the intervention. The communication flow within this type of research is primarily between the facilitator and the group, so that the ideas may be communicated to the group. This research promotes more efficient and effective practice. It is product directed but promotes personal participation by practitioners in the process of improvement.

Type 2: Practical-Deliberative: In this type of research project the researcher and the practitioners come together to identify potential problems, their underlying causes, and possible interventions. The researcher and practitioner agree, through dialogue, on the problem definition. This approach seeks to improve practice through the application of the personal wisdom of the participants. Practical action research fosters the development of professionalism by emphasizing the part played by personal judgment in decisions.

Type 3: Emancipatory Approach: This approach promotes a critical consciousness which exhibits itself in political as well as practical action to promote change. There are two goals for the researcher using this approach, one is to increase the closeness between the actual problems encountered by practitioners in a specific setting and the theory used to explain and resolve the problem. The second goal, which goes beyond the other two

approaches, is to assist in identifying and making explicit fundamental problems by raising the practitioners collective consciousness to them.

This mode of action research does not begin with theory and end with practice, but it is informed by theory and often it is the confrontation with theory that provides the initiative to undertake the practice. The dynamic relationship between theory and practice in this research method entails the expansion of both theory and practice during the project.

Application: Action research has the potential to generate genuine and sustained improvements. It gives practitioners new opportunities to reflect on and assess their work; to explore and test new ideas, methods, and materials; to assess how effective the new approaches were; to share feedback with team members; and to make decisions about which new approaches to include in the team's approach and plans.

Action research methodologies aim to integrate action and reflection, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied. They help the individual practitioner develop skills of reflective practice; and also help organization develop a culture of inquiry as part of their work life, to develop learning organizations or communities of inquiry.

Resources:

Masters, J. (1995) 'The History of Action Research' in I. Hughes (ed) *Action Research Electronic Reader*, The University of Sydney, <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arr/arrow/rmasters.html>

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>

<http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/acts.html>