Culture of Learning Project

Challenge

Action Research Guide for Practitioners

Contents

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What is Action Research?

Action research is defined by Carr and Kemmis (1986) as:

a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

i.e. research that allows us to understand and improve upon our own practice, and the situation/s in which we carry them out.

Or, as Stringer (1999) more succinctly explains: look – think – act

Educational Action Research derives from the work of John Dewey, the American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed that education professionals should work as a community to solve problems.

The focus of action research within education is on curriculum, and professional development, and on the application of learning in a wider, social context. Put simply, we look at what we do, and try to find out if we could do something differently in order to make it better, then share this with colleagues.

This kind of research is cyclical. The point is to identify a problem or area to improve upon, explore a solution, reflect on your findings, adjust your actions in response, then plan the next improvement.

Why do we do it?

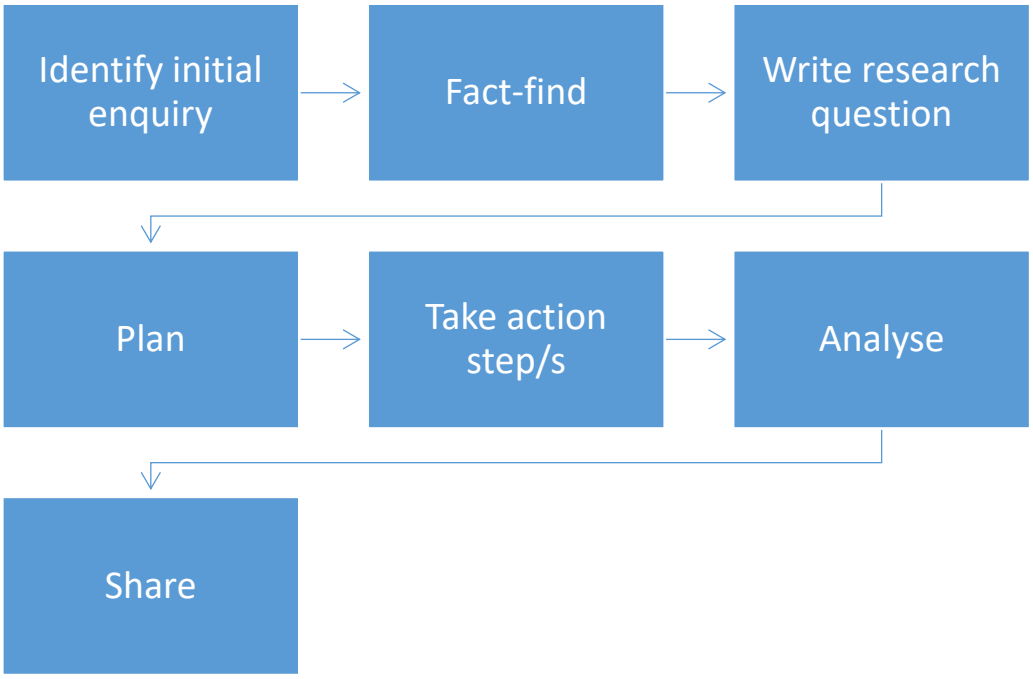
In addition to improving our own practice, this type of research gives us an opportunity to contribute to wider knowledge in our community. Based on the principle of shared, reflective practice, action research can lead to change; it builds a greater knowledge-base that can change the way we do things – whether it be improvements in how students learn, how we use ICT, how we help students develop skills beyond the classroom, how we assess progress, or curriculum developments. While action research is often understood as an individual pursuit, it can also be a collective endeavour involving groups of colleagues, institutions and organisations.

The Challenge: Complete a piece of small-scale Action Research.

Your challenge for *Culture of Learning* is to plan and carry out a piece of action research that addresses an issue you have identified in your own setting, and to share your findings.

Planning your research

The process of carrying out an action research project involves a number of steps, as follows. Each step requires careful consideration.



(Adapted from Lewin, 1948)

The process is one stage in a longer cycle of reflective practice. After we have shared our findings, we begin again by identifying the next stage of enquiry and continue through the process until we are happy with the aspect of our practice.

The Action Research Process

1. Identify initial enquiry

   Consider the following questions:
   - What do you want to know?
   - What question do you want to find the answer to?
   - What element of your own practice/situation would benefit from improvement?
   - What are your aims and objectives?
   - What is the purpose of your research?

Refer to the *Elements of the Learning Environment* outlined in the Culture of Learning Matrix (and below) – are there any issues within these broad categories that are particularly relevant to your situation?

- **Understanding of learning**
- **Emotions and motivation**
- **Co-operative learning**
- **Inquiry based approach to learning**
- **Technology**
- **Formative assessment and feedback**
- **Community as a resource**
- **Strategies and innovations**

Think broadly, and remember to keep it small-scale, achievable.

Example:
My students struggle to read Shakespeare. It's part of the core curriculum so they have to study at least two of his plays. I wonder if producing an animated adaptation of a scene from one of the plays as a class, might help my students understand the text.

2. Fact-find

What is the context of your research project?

- Describe your setting, and how your project fits into this specific situation/location/social space.

Review the literature

- Search for other research in your field that might be useful, or offer some information about similar research projects and their outcomes.
- Use this information to describe the issue in a broader context than your own setting, reflect upon and reframe your question in light of what you now know.

There are different types of literature review. In putting a research plan together, it's useful to carry out a *scoping review* of the literature. This type of review outlines what has already been found out about your particular topic, and draws attention to any gaps or questions that are unanswered. By doing this, you will be able to show where your research fits into the current literature – what is already known. For the purposes of this Challenge, there is no need to complete an exhaustive list of every piece of research ever carried out and every 'fact' that is now known about your topic. However, it is useful for you to have an idea about what the wider education community has previously found.

Information on literature reviews

If you are interested in finding out more about literature reviews and how to write them, there are various sources of information:

- There are many published books on educational research that include information on literature reviews. A quick library search will find these.
- Reading other published research will give you a great understanding of literature reviews. Whether in education journals, or through research published by organisations such as the UK's National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER): https://www.nfer.ac.uk/research
- Universities often publish guides to writing literature reviews. Although these are, of course, aimed at university students. The University of Kent offers this comprehensive guide: https://www.kent.ac.uk/learning/resources/studyguides/literaturereviews.pdf
- Professor Pat Thomson writes a lot about the subject on her blog: https://patthomson.net/ the focus is on doctoral research, but her writing is accessible, informative and interesting

Sourcing literature

Other than going to the library, you can use online resources such as google Scholar to find journal articles, and information on books, articles and papers via databases of published material, such as *Education Source*: https://www.ebscohost.com/academic/education-source

3. Write your research question

Research questions help us to focus our research projects so that they are achievable. They also help determine the methods we use to find out what we want to know, and guides the analysis of our findings, and the final reporting. The research question keeps us on track throughout the project.

Your **research question** should be:

Clear – it should be easy to understand

Specific – try to get across exactly what you want to know

Original – remember that you're researching something new, that has not been done before

Achievable – is it possible for you to answer this question?

Relevant – to the literature you've read, your own setting, the Culture of Learning Challenge

Interesting – remember your audience. Why do people need to know about your project?

Example:
Can producing a short, animated adaptation of a scene increase student understanding of Shakespeare's Macbeth?

4. Plan

In order to complete your research project, you will need to plan effectively and purposefully. You need to select a method, or methods, that will enable you to answer your question and make sure you have the resources to carry out the research – both the practical resources and your own skills in generating the data and analysing it. The methods may be quantitative (generate statistical data) or qualitative (descriptive, typically people's opinions, feelings or ideas). You may choose a mixed methods approach that uses both qualitative and quantitative.

Example:
To find out whether my students understand Macbeth after producing an animated film, I might hand out a quiz. However, it is important that I remember to quiz them before they produce the animation as well. That way I can tell if there has been any increase in understanding.
Or, I might hold focus group discussions before and after, and record what the students said, and how they described the play.

There are many different methods of generating data, and the choice of method depends on what you want to find out.

Some examples of methods

questionnaire	survey	interview
focus group	co-create an image	quiz
observation	discussion	make a film

You must also ensure that your methods and the data they generate are valid (the data shows what you say it does) and reliable (it is are accurate). One way to increase validity and reliability is to use more than one method – triangulation. This helps you check across the different data to see whether they are in agreement.

Ethical considerations

In educational research, ethical data generation works on the principle of voluntary, informed consent. This means that if you are working with people ('research participants'), it is considered good, ethical practice to inform them about the research you are carrying out, give them the opportunity to ask questions about it, and to volunteer to participate of their own accord. In addition, if they do not wish to be a part of your research, they should be allowed to withdraw at any time. Research participants should also be afforded anonymity, and assured that their data will be treated confidentially. Participants should not be named when you share your research.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) has published an online guide to *Ethics and Educational Research* (Hammersley, and Traianou, 2012), that outlines the following main principles:

"1. Minimising Harm. Is a research strategy likely to cause harm, how serious is this, and is there any way in which it could be justified or excused? …

2. Respecting Autonomy. Does the research process show respect for people in the sense of allowing them to make decisions for themselves, notably about whether or not to participate? …

3. Protecting Privacy …

4. Offering Reciprocity. Researchers depend upon being allowed access to data, and this may involve people cooperating in various ways; for example, giving up time in order to be interviewed or to fill in a questionnaire. Given this, what, if anything, can participants reasonably expect in return from researchers; and what should researchers offer them? …

5. Treating People Equitably. It may be argued that the various individuals and groups that a researcher comes into contact with in the course of research should be treated equally, in the sense that no-one is unjustly favoured or discriminated against."

(Hammersley and Traianou, 2012) Available on-line at: https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Ethics-and-Educational-Research.pdf Accessed: 14 February 2017.

For further information,

BERA also publish *Ethical Guidelines for Education Research* (2011), here: https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/resources-for-researchers

And the European Educational Research Association (EERA) Ethical Guidelines and available here: http://www.eera-ecer.de/about/ethical-guidelines/

5. Take action step/s

In research terms, this is referred to as data generation or data collection. At this point, you will have fully planned how you are going to carry out the 'action' part of your action research. Remembering the ethical principles outlined above, now you just need to:

… hand out your questionnaire, launch an online survey, conduct an interview, run a focus group, set a drawing task, adjudicate a quiz, try out a new piece of equipment, or new learning strategy, screen a film, team teach, produce an audio file, create a mind map …

6. Analyse

After sorting and collating the data, the work of analysing begins. This comprises three actions:

Interpret – what story does the data tell?

Evaluate – how and why does it tell this story?

Explain – what have you learned, and what does it mean?

Your analysis should be reflective and ethical, valid and reliable.

7. Share

Not all research needs to be shared in an article written for an academic journal read by an audience of academics. And nor should it be. However, it is important that you share what you have learned.

Be creative in your approach and choose an appropriate medium for your research, such as:

Audio/Visual: diagram, film, photograph, or animation. For example, this BBC Advertising research project: https://advertising.bbcworldwide.com/insights/affluentmillennials

Or the photographic work of Julian Germain, such as *Classroom Portraits:* http://www.juliangermain.com/projects/classrooms.php

Text: project summary or briefing paper, for example The Joseph Rowntree Foundation *Findings* series: https://www.jrf.org.uk/reports

Visual/text: poster, wordcloud, or infographic, such as this from the British Film Institute on black actors in cinema: http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/black-actors-british-film-industry-statistics

Spoken: workshop with colleagues, or talk at a conference, which could be videoed. For example, these videos from the 2016 BERA conference: https://www.bera.ac.uk/beraconference-2017/conference-2016-videos

Digital: social media page, vlog, or blog. For example, the TALE project at University of Nottingham publishes an ongoing blog of research activity: https://researchtale.net/