

What Research Says to the Practitioner

Action Research Defining Paths Towards Empowerment and Change

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Action Research has been established as an appropriate research paradigm for educational, professional, managerial and organizational development and has been the focus of many books, studies and publications for the last 10 –15 years. Action Research is collaborative, critical, and self-critical inquiry by practitioners (e.g. teachers, managers) into a major problem, issue or concern in their own practice. It is a cyclical process of strategic planning, action, observation, reflection and revision based on shared values. This paper will summarize the action research movement and discuss its implications for environmental educators. Included are: 1) major principles and procedures, 2) major areas of action research, and 3) implications for environmental educators and administrators. An empirical study in EE is used to illustrate the major aspects of Action Research as well as ground the concepts and principles of Action Research in everyday practice. The Action Research movement has great potential for the training of EE professionals as well as their continued professional development.

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research (AR) is the reflexive process by which educators systematically study their problems in order to guide, correct and evaluate their decisions and actions regarding the improvement of teaching and learning in their individual professional context. It is a cyclical process of: strategic planning, action, implementing the plan and observation, evaluation and self-evaluation, critical and self-critical reflection on the results.

Several characteristics differentiate AR from other types of research. Primary is its focus on helping practitioners evolve with and into researchers. As we know people learn best, and more willingly when they apply what they have learned, when they do it themselves. AR also has a unique social dimension - the research takes place in real-world situations, and aims to solve real problems. Finally, the initiating practitioner/researcher, unlike in other disciplines, makes no attempt to remain objective, but openly acknowledges their bias to the other participants.

There are several types of AR. The most basic AR begins with the individual and progressively extends to communities of collaboration. The most basic form of AR is the technical approach in which the individual investigates the effectiveness/efficiency of their educational practice. The focus is on an individual's professional development.

“Action research is simply 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.”

Next is the practical approach that includes all the aspects of the practical as well as an emphasis on the practitioners' understanding and transformation of consciousness. Finally is the emancipatory approach including all aspects of technical and practical as well as participants' emancipation from the dictates of tradition, self-deception and coercion. Emancipatory AR is often a critique of bureaucratic systematization and works towards the transformation of the organization and the educational system.

HOW DO YOU DO ACTION RESEARCH?

There is no single way to do action research. The process is one of reflective practice based on the idiosyncratic needs of an individual, community or organization. That being said, there is a general approach to the process of AR which is often referred to as the AR cycle since it is a continual iterative process of questioning and seeking answers.

The Action Research Cycle

Stage One: Problem Identification: Acknowledge an inequity and the need for change. Can be an existing (even historical) problem, or a newly emerged issue.

Stage Two: Evaluation: Develop and carry out methods for evaluating the breadth and depth of the inequity and how it informs the experiences of all community members.

Stage Three: Recommendations: Based on the Evaluation, provide specific recommendations for change and/or continued evaluation.

Stage Four: Application/Practice: Work with the powers that be to take action and institutionalize the recommendations.

Stage Five: Reflection: With changes in place, reflect on ways in which new practices affect the school community.

Stage Six: Consideration of New Questions: Acknowledge and dialogue about new questions that have emerged from the changes. Have the changes worked? Are there any shortcomings?

WHAT AREAS HAS ACTION RESEARCH BEEN USED IN?

Professional Development:

Action Research (AR) represents a growing field of educational research whose chief identifying characteristic is the recognition of the pragmatic requirements of educational practitioners for organized reflective inquiry into classroom instruction. AR is an process designed to empower all participants in the educational process (students, instructors and other parties) with the means to improve the practices conducted within the educational experience. Action research has the primary intent of providing a framework for qualitative investigations by teachers and researchers in complex working classroom situations.

Participatory Action Research (PAR):

Participatory action research (PAR) is a method of research where creating a positive social change is the predominant driving force. PAR grew out of social and educational research and exists today as one of the few research methods which embraces principles of participation and reflection, and empowerment and emancipation of groups seeking to improve their social situation.

Principles of PAR include:

- The "problem" originates within the community or workplace itself.
- The research goal is to fundamentally improve the lives of those involved, through structural transformation.
- The people in the community or workplace are involved in controlling the entire research process.

- The focus of PAR is on oppressed groups whose issues include inaccessibility, colonization, marginalization, exploitation, racism, sexism, cultural disaffection, etc.

Organizational Change:

Organizational Action Research is a general term to refer to research methodologies and projects where the researcher(s) tries to directly improve the participating organization(s) and, at the same time, to generate scientific knowledge. Action research projects should search for organizational improvements "during" the research, rather than after the research. The definition also highlights that action research should search for scientific knowledge.

Environmental Management:

The growing use of action research within environmental research and development initiatives explicitly recognize that natural resource management issues (such as biodiversity protection and enhancement) are not characterized so much by problems for which an answer must be found, but rather by issues which need to be resolved and will inevitably require one or more of the parties to change their views. The underlying assumption of these approaches is that effective social change depends on the commitment and understanding of those involved in the change process.

Similarly, exploring the social process of learning about situations is inextricably linked with the acts of changing those situations. Thus, the action research approach seeks to influence the phenomena being studied during the action research process itself, in the belief that the true nature of social systems (social, cultural and institutional considerations) become most evident when you seek to make changes to them.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF AR FOR EE?

Action Research has many aspects that are congruent with the goals of environmental education. AR is contextually-based, directly addressing the concerns of EE educators, students, community members and organizations. Like EE it is based on the given social, cultural and political culture of the practitioners. Action Research like EE works toward change in behavior and outcomes leading towards goals such as ecological sustainability. Similar to several variants of the EE imperative, action research is place-based and community-centered. It is values driven with the focus on the individual, community, organization and environment.

Action research holds great promise for joining practitioners with researchers in the field of environmental education. Combining AR with EE may also lead to more obvious, distinct environmental/ecological outcomes of EE efforts. For specific examples of action research focusing on the field of EE go to www.ARexpeditions.montana.edu.

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