

Extract 1

A thematic concern and four *moments* of action research

Before proceeding to examine a practical example of action research let us pause to think about the nature of a thematic concern. It is on some *thematic concern* (or educational issue, or broad educational question) that the four fundamental aspects of action research are brought into play.

Action research is participatory, collaborative research which typically arises from the clarification of some concerns generally shared by a group. People *describe* their concerns, explore what others think, and probe to find what it might be possible to do. In the discussion they decide what it is that it would be feasible to work on — a group project. The group identifies a *thematic concern*. The thematic concern defines the substantive area in which the group decides to focus its improvement strategies. Group members plan action together, *act* and *observe* individually or collectively, and *reflect* together. They *reformulate more critically informed* plans deliberately; as the group consciously constructs its own understanding and history.

The thematic concern should not be confused with a method which might be used to improve things. It should attempt to raise the problematic nature of a particular educational concern and not uncritically accept or propose an educational method or way that is supposed to be better. We can illustrate the distinction between method and the educational substance of a thematic concern with some examples:

1. *Thematic concern*: Developing the sensitivity of curriculum and teaching to students' home learning environments.
Method: Increasing the educational effectiveness of parent participation.
2. *Thematic concern*: Developing in students a deeper and more active sense of what it means to think scientifically.
Method: Increasing activity learning in science.
3. *Thematic concern*: Developing and sustaining a bicultural heritage in an ethnic community through education.
Method: A bilingual, bicultural curriculum with community members actively engaged in language and cultural classroom activities.

The identification of the thematic concern engages the group in the four fundamental aspects of the action research. There is a dynamic complementarity which links these four aspects into a cycle, and ultimately into a spiral of such cycles. To do action research a group and its members undertake to:

- develop a plan of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- act to implement the plan
- observe the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
- reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of cycles.

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But isn't this what every practitioner does? To a degree, of course, this is so. But to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than one usually does in everyday life; and to use the relationships between these moments in the process as a source of both improvement and knowledge. The action researcher will carry out the four activities collaboratively, involving others affected by the action in the action research process. Let us consider each *moment* separately.

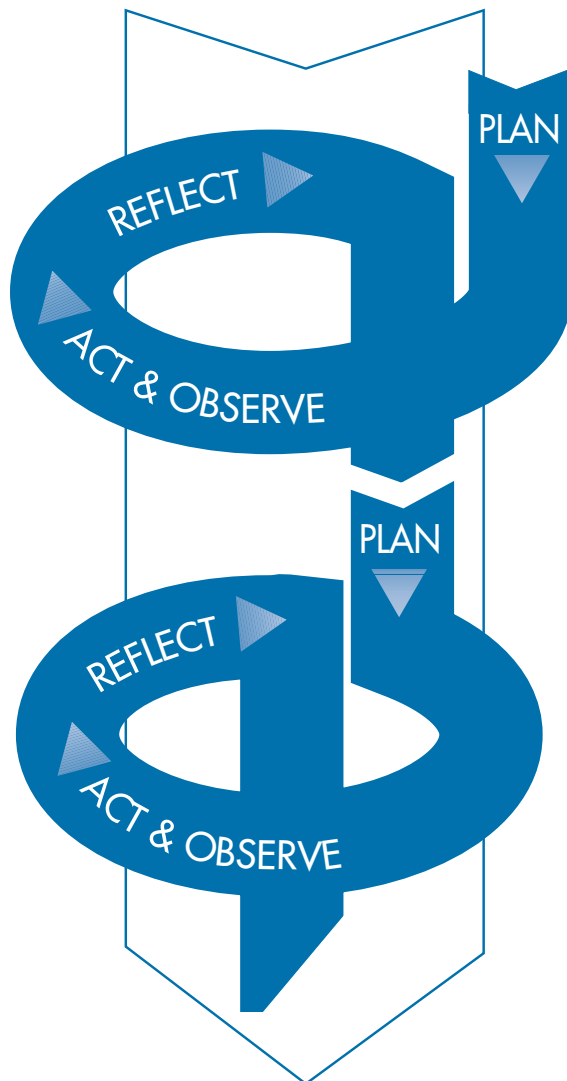


Figure 1: The action research spiral

The plan is constructed action and by definition must be prospective to action — it must be forward looking. It must recognise that all social action is to some degree unpredictable and therefore somewhat risky. The general plan must be flexible enough to adapt to unforeseen effects and previously unrecognised constraints. The action prescribed by the plan must be critically informed in two senses. First, it must take account of the risks involved in social change and recognise real constraints, material and political, in the situation. Second, critically informed action should be chosen because it allows practitioners to act more effectively over a greater range of circumstances, more wisely and more prudently. It should help practitioners to realise a new potential for education action. As part of the planning process, participants must collaborate in discussion (both theoretical and practical discourse) to build a language by which they must analyse and improve their understandings and action in the situation.

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Action in the sense intended here is deliberate and controlled; it is a careful and thoughtful variation of practice, and is critically informed. It recognises practice as ideas-in-action; and uses action as a platform for the further development of later action; action with a critically informed educational intent. Action is guided by planning in the sense that it looks back to planning for its rationale. But critically informed action is not completely controlled by plans. It is essentially risky. It takes place in real time and encounters real political and material constraints (some of which arise suddenly and unpredictably as consequences of changes in the social and political life of the setting). As a result, plans for action must always have a tentative and provisional quality; they must be flexible and open to change in the light of circumstances. Critically informed action also recognises that it is to some extent bound by prior practice (what has been done before, previous ways of working), but prior practice also has only a tentative grasp on the realities of the present. Action is thus fluid and dynamic, requiring instant decisions about what is to be done and the exercise of practical judgement. The implementation of action plans will assume the character of a material, social and political *struggle* towards improvement. Negotiation and compromise may be necessary — but compromises must also be seen in their strategic context. Modest gains may do for the time being. Later critically informed action can be based on previous gains.

(We will have more to say about action and improvement in Chapter 2, “Improving education through action research”, where we identify more closely the relationship between educational action research and the improvement of society.)

One of the ways in which action research differs from action in usual situations is that it is observed. The actors aim to collect evidence about their action in order to evaluate it thoroughly. In order to be prepared for evaluation they give thought before they act to the kinds of evidence they will need to evaluate their action critically.

Observation has the function of documenting the effects of critically informed action. It looks forward, providing the basis for reflection now, but more so in the immediate future as the present cycle runs its course. Careful observation is necessary because action will always be limited by constraints of reality, and all of these constraints will never be clear in advance. Observation must be planned, so that there will be a documentary basis for subsequent reflection, but it must not be too narrow. It must be responsive, open-eyed and open-minded. Peripheral vision must be sensitised to pick up the unexpected. Observation categories (and measurements) planned in advance will be insufficient. Like the action itself, observation plans must be flexible and open to record the unexpected. Action researchers should always maintain a journal to record observations additional to those collected in planned observation categories.

Action researchers need to observe the action process, the effects of action (intended and unintended), the circumstances of and constraints on action, the way circumstances and constraints limit or channel the planned action and its effects, and other issues which arise. Observation will always be guided by the intent to provide a sound basis for critical self-reflection. Observation foreshadows the achievements of reflection.

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In this way, it can contribute to the improvement of practice through greater understanding and more critically informed strategic action. However, its subject matter will always be the action, its effects, and the context of the situation in which the action must be taken.

Reflection recalls action as it has been recorded in observation, but it is also active. Reflection seeks to make sense of processes, problems, issues and constraints made manifest in strategic action. It takes account of the variety of perspectives possible in the social situation and comprehends the issues and circumstances in which they arise. Reflection is usually aided by discussion among participants. Through discourse, group reflection leads to the reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation and provides the basis for the revised plan. Reflection has an evaluative aspect — it asks action researchers to weigh their experience — to judge whether effects (and issues which arose) were desirable, and suggest ways of proceeding. But there is also a sense in which reflection is descriptive, it allows reconnaissance, building a more vivid picture of life and work in the situation, constraints on action and more importantly, of what might now be possible, for the group, and for its individual members as actors committed to group goals.

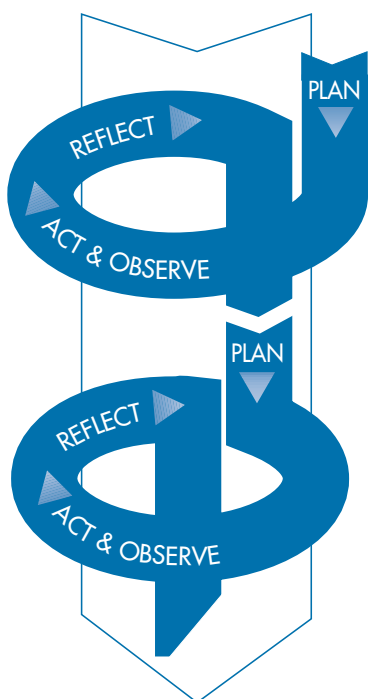


Figure 2: The individual aspect in action research.

Action research is a dynamic process in which these four moments are to be understood not as static steps, complete in themselves, but rather as moments in the action research spiral of planning, action, observing and reflecting. Improvements in understanding will appear at first as a better developed rationale for the practice. The rationale is developed by being tested by the group in practice; each proposition in the rationale can be checked against practice and against other parts of the rationale. In the long term, these propositions will develop into a critical perspective on the practice and on education itself, becoming a critical theory which includes consideration of such matters as

how students learn and how the message systems of the school (curriculum, school organisation, teaching and learning activities and assessment practices) create meanings for students.

The importance of the group in action research cannot be overemphasised. Activities where an individual goes through cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection, *cannot* be regarded as action research. *Action research is not individualistic*. To lapse into individualism is to destroy the critical dynamic of the group and to risk falling victim to the fallacious liberal notion that all educational practices and the values which they purport to realise are equally defensible (McTaggart and Garbutcheon-Singh, 1987).

Extract 2

Key points about action research

Source: Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (Eds) *The Action Research Planner, Third Edition*. Geelong: Deakin University Press, pp 22–25.

1. Action research is an approach to **improving education by changing it** and learning from the consequences of changes.
2. Action research is **participatory**: It is research through which people work towards the improvement of **their own practices** (and only secondarily on other people's practices).
3. Action research develops through the **self-reflective spiral**: a spiral of cycles of **planning, acting** (implementing plans), **observing** (systematically), **reflecting**... and then re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting. One good way to begin an action research project is to collect some initial data in an area of general interest (a reconnaissance), then to reflect, and then to make a plan for changes action: another way to begin is to make an exploratory change, collect data of what happens, reflect, and then build more refined plans for action. In both cases, issues and understandings, on the one hand, and the practices themselves, on the other, develop and evolve through the action research process, but only when the self-reflective spiral is thoughtfully and systematically followed in processes in group critique.
4. Action research is **collaborative**: it involves those responsible for action in improving it, widening the collaborative group from those most directly involved to as many as possible of those affected by the practices concerned.
5. Action research establishes **self-critical communities** of people participating and collaborating in all phases of the research process: the planning, the action, the observation and the reflection; it aims to build communities of people committed to **enlightening** themselves about the relationship between circumstance, action and consequence in their own situation, and **emancipating** themselves from the institutional and personal constraints which limit their power to live their own legitimate educational and social values.
6. Action research is a **systematic learning process** in which people act deliberately, though remaining open to surprises and responsive to opportunities. It is a process of using *critical intelligence* to inform our action, and developing it so that our educational action becomes **praxis** (critically informed, committed action) through which we may consistently live our educational values.

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7. Action research involves people **theorising** about their practices, being **inquisitive** about circumstances, action and consequences and coming to understand the relationships between circumstances, actions and consequences in their own lives. The theories action educational work is as it is. We subject these initial rationales to critical scrutiny through the action research process.
8. Action research requires that people put their practices, ideas and assumptions about institutions to the *test* by gathering **compelling evidence** which could convince them that their previous practices, ideas and assumptions were wrong or headed in the wrong direction.
9. Action research is open-minded about what counts as evidence (or data), it involves not only **keeping records** which describe what is happening as accurately as possible (given the particular questions being investigated and the real-life circumstances of collecting the data) but also **collecting** and **analysing** our own **judgements, reactions** and **impressions** about what is going on.
10. Action research involves keeping a **personal journal** in which we record our progress and our reflections about two parallel sets of learning: our learnings about the practices we are studying (how our practices are developing) and our learnings about the process (the practice) of studying them (how our action research project is going).
11. Action research is a **political** process because it involves us in making changes that will affect others, for this reason, it sometimes creates resistance to change, both in ourselves and in others.
12. Action research involves people in making **critical analyses** of the situations (classrooms, schools or systems) in which they work — these situations are **structured** institutionally. The pattern of resistance an action researcher meets in changing his or her own practices is a pattern of conflicts between the new practices and the accepted practices of the institution (accepted practices of communication, decision making and educational work). By making a critical analysis of the institution, the action researcher can understand how resistances are rooted in conflicts between competing views of educational organisation and decision making. This critical understanding will help the action researcher to act politically towards overcoming resistances (for example, by involving others collaboratively in the research process, inviting others to explore their practices, or by working in the wider school context towards more rational educational understandings, more than just processes of decision making, and more fulfilling forms of educational work for all involved).

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Key points about action research

13. Action research **starts small**, by working through changes which even a single person (myself) can try, and works towards extensive changes, even critiques of ideas or institutions which in turn might lead to more general reforms of classroom, school or system-wide policies and practices.
14. Action research starts with **small cycles** of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting which can help to define issues, ideas and assumptions more clearly so that those involved can define more **powerful questions** for themselves as their work progresses.
15. Action research starts with **small groups** of collaborators at the start, but widens the community of participating action researchers so that it gradually includes more and more of those involved and affected by the practices in question.
16. Action research allows us to build *records* of our improvements: (a) records of our changing **activities** and **practices**, (b) records of the changes in the **language** and **discourse** in which we describe, explain and justify our practices, (c) records of the changes in the **social relationships** and **forms of organisation** which characterise and constrain our practices, and (d) records of the development in our mastery of **action research**.
17. Action research allows us to give a **reasoned justification** of our educational work to others because we can show how the evidence we have gathered and the critical reflection we have done have helped us to create a **developed, tested and critically examined rationale** for what we are doing. Having developed such a rationale, we may legitimately ask others to justify their practices in terms of their theories and the evidence of their critical self-reflection.