



Doing Action Research

A Short Introduction

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- John Dewey
 - Kurt Lewin— father of AR coining the term ‘action research’: Lewin described action research ‘as a way of generating knowledge about a social system while, at the same time, attempting to change it’ (Lewin, 1945, as quoted in Hart & Bond, 1995, p. 13).

Drummond (2007)

Action research?

- The study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it' (Elliot, 1991, p. 69)
- It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury 2001, p. 1)

Brydon-Miller, M., Greenwood, D., & Maguire, P. (2003).



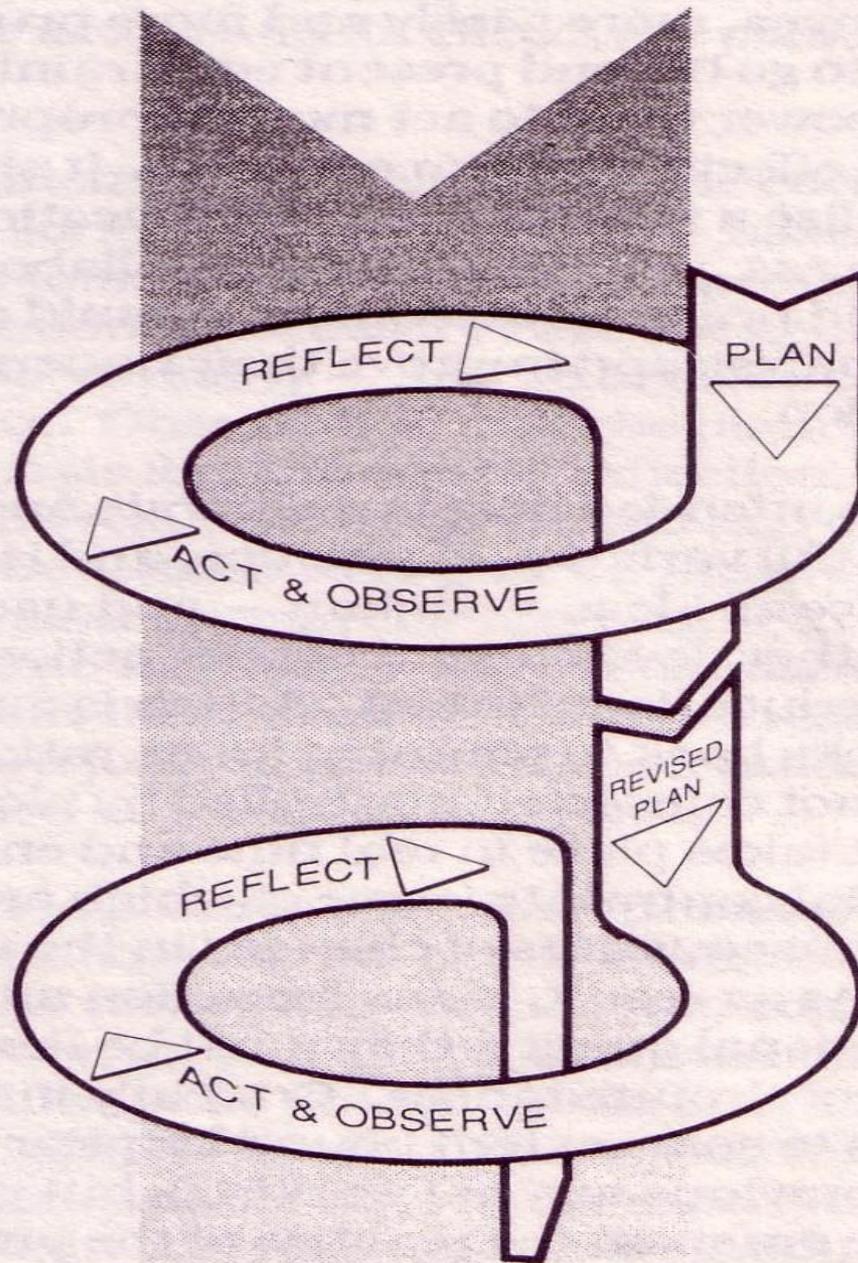
The *action* component involves participants in a process of planned intervention, where concrete strategies, processes or activities are developed within the research context. Intervention through action occurs in response to a perceived problem, puzzle or question – a gap between the ideal and the reality that people in the social context perceive as in need of change. The gaps might relate to teaching, learning, curriculum or syllabus implementation, as well as aspects of school management or administration.

Burns, A. (2005).



The *research* element of AR involves the systematic collection of data as planned interventions are enacted, followed by analysis of what is revealed by the data, and reflection on the implications of the findings for further observation and action.

Burns, A. (2005).



The action research spiral
Kemmis & McTaggart (1988, p. 11)

Essential characteristics of AR are

- **Decentralization** of the inquiry into the local context as a means to solve real-life problems and bridge gaps between general laws and specific applications;
- **Deregulation** in movement away from “restrictive conventional rules of the research game, the overweening concern with validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability”;
- and **Cooperativeness** in execution where there are no functional distinctions between the researcher and the researched so that they all assume “equal footing in determining what questions will be asked, what information will be analyzed, and how conclusions and courses of action will be determined.” (Stringer 1999,p. xii)

Silver, D. (2006).



Table 1 Major characteristics of approaches to action research

	TECHNICAL AR	PRACTICAL AR	CRITICAL AR
PHILOSOPHICAL BASE	Natural sciences	Hermeneutics	Critical theory
NATURE OF REALITY	Measurable	Multiple, holistic, constructed	Inter-related with social and political power structures
NATURE OF PROBLEM	Predefined (problem-posing)	Defined in context (problem-solving)	Defined in context in relation to emerging values (problematising)
STATUS OF KNOWLEDGE	Separate, deductive	Inductive, theory producing	Inductive, theory producing, emancipatory, participatory
NATURE OF UNDERSTANDING	Events explained in terms of real causes and simultaneous effects	Events described in terms of interaction between the external context and individual thinking	Events understood in terms of political, social and economic constraints to improved conditions
PURPOSE OF RESEARCH	Discover 'laws' of underlying reality	Discover the meanings people make of actions	Understand what impedes more democratic and equal practices
CHANGE OUTCOMES	Change is value-free and short-lived	Change is value-bounded and dependent on individuals involved	Change is value-relative and leads to ongoing emancipation

RA is not...

- ... a scientific method applied to teaching
- ...used to test hypothesis about non evolving situations

RA is...

- an **approach** mostly embedded within qualitative research frameworks and not excluding quantitative analysis.
- Interventionist by nature.
- Used to induce change in problematic situations, change parameters, involved participants as well as the researcher him/herself.

Often used research tools

- Interviews
- Observation
- Discourse analysis
- Text analysis (official documents, exams, etc.)
- Field notes
- Surveys
- Use of **grounded** theory
- Etc.

Grounded theory

an exploratory method of research, it does not begin from a position of an existing theory and defined concepts. Rather, as the data, which can be anything, are collected, coded, and analyzed simultaneously, concepts and properties become evident.

Schreiber, R. S. (2001).

Critics: RA...

- ... no developed sound research procedures, techniques and methodologies
- ... is small-scale, not generalisable – low external validity
- ... low control of the research environment – cannot contribute to causal theories of teaching and learning
- ... strong personal involvement on the part of the participants – overly subjective, anecdotal
- ... not reported in a form that conforms to a recognisable scientific genre.

Counter-attacks from RA researchers

- Clear underlying concepts and methodological processes and assumptions
- Explicit procedures
- full and adequate details of
 - the epistemological approaches
 - assumptions underpinning the research,
 - the specifics of the research context,
- careful documentation and analysis of data
- explanation of the meanings the researcher seeks to create.

Burns, A. (2005).

Counter-attacks from RA researchers

- *Iteration*: rigour and reducing subjectivity. enables initial insights and findings
- deeper, new but related, questions.
- Further data collection serves to:
 - i) build on evidence from previous cycles;
 - ii) expand the scope of the study;
 - iii) triangulate the data across different episodes, sites and subjects through multiple data sources;
 - iv) test new findings against previous iterations of the cycle;
 - v) avoid the bias inherent in cross-sectional research.

The iterative aspect becomes particularly powerful when research is conducted collaboratively, as findings and outcomes can be cross-referenced across multiple activities.

Learning Action Research

*“Our view is that action research is **learned in action, in reflections with others, in reflection on what is written (theory), and in discourse, interaction through language, especially written discourse.** Taken together, these four components comprise the cycle of action and reflection that describe the progression of action research [...]. What may be most promising for learning action research may be no more complex than these cycles, which mirror the cycles in the research itself.”*

Levin & Martin (2007, p. 223)

Evolving nature of AR

Changes of plan due to:

- Context and results
- Deeper understanding of issues at hand
- Awareness of prejudicial preconceptions
- Etc.

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And you?

**How did you learn to do
action research?**