

Background of Action Research

The term action research was coined by the social psychologist Kurt Lewin in the United States in about 1944 in connection with research which aimed to promote social action through democratic decision making and active participation of practitioners in the research process. The target group for Lewin's programme of action research was field workers who were trying to improve relations between minority groups in American society. Lewin believed that through action research advances in theory and much needed social change might simultaneously be achieved.

It was in the field of group dynamics and human relations that Lewin's ideas flourished initially and continue to flourish today. For instance he directly influenced the foundation and subsequent work of the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations which was established after his visits to Britain in the 1930s.

Since that time, most attempts to explain action research have emphasised the close relationship between research or investigation on the one hand and action or practice on the other. For example Rapoport (1970) defined action research as:

... a type of applied social research differing from other varieties in the immediacy of the researcher's involvement in the action process.

(In Deakin University, 1988, The action research reader, p. 89)

In addition there is a clear understanding that action research is research undertaken by those in the field: field workers, teachers, administrators or supervisors in order to change and improve their own practice. It is moreover usually thought of as a group process which enables co-operative work to influence both thought and action among group members.

Action Research as Research in Education

Under Lewin's influence, the idea of action research was adopted by educationalists and Lewin himself worked on action research programmes with teachers. His ideas were particularly influential at Teachers' College, Columbia University in the areas of curriculum research and collaborative research with teachers, schools and school districts.

In spite of the continuing interest in action research in other fields of social inquiry, in education it was subject to criticism on the basis of the methodology, effectiveness, and

practicality, and interest declined in the late 1950s only to re-emerge in the 1970s in a different guise under the influence of Stenhouse (1975).

A negative reaction to action research is understandable if we recall that for most of this century the dominant models of educational research have been the natural science model based on the research paradigm used in the physical sciences and, more recently, the interpretative research model which aims to discover and interpret the perspectives of participants in the educational process. Clearly action research presents a challenge to these research models since it aims to promote change in specific situations rather than discover 'truth' and derive general laws.

Many educators have been concerned with the apparent gap between research and theory on the one hand and daily practices of education on the other: educational problems as defined by researchers and as defined by practitioners can be very different. Action researchers try to close this gap between research and practice by creating a situation in which practitioners define research problems and conduct research in such a way that the outcomes are directly useful to classroom or other educational situations.

Kemmis (1988), who himself contributed to the renewal of interest in the potential of action research, attributes the revival of interest to several factors:

1. A strong interest among educational researchers in helping practitioners deal with problems of practice.
2. A broad methodological interest in interpretative or illuminative methods which attempt to define the problems of the field in ways which represent the understandings of practitioners.
3. A growth of collaborative curriculum development and evaluation work.
4. An explicit commitment to addressing social and political problems of education through participatory research carried out by practitioners on problems of immediate and more general public concern.

During its re-emergence in the 1970s, action research took on a different kind of rationale than in its original form. Lewin's early work, though it emphasised field work, did not seek to abandon the scientific rigour of traditional research in the social sciences. Quite the reverse. What he was trying to do was make sure that research ended in real life applications rather than just written accounts of theory.

Later, under the influence of curriculum theorists such as Stenhouse, Schwab, Elliott and Skilbeck emphasis shifted to the idea of practical deliberation, focusing on human interpretation, negotiation and detailed descriptive accounts in place of measurement and statistical analysis. With this trend came the assumption that the enquiry processes must

develop naturally rather than being constrained by preconceived ideas. Hence the expectation that there should be a continuing number of cycles of enquiry. According to this interpretation, action research aims to develop teachers who are not only active practitioners in the field but also reflective professionals. It leads to a new and enhanced status for the activity of teaching in that it is now seen as an activity which can be investigated, considered and improved. The outcome of this process is to enable teachers to provide a clearer rationale for what they do, based upon their own professional observation and experience.

The third development in action research revolves around the work of Kemmis and his colleagues at Deakin University in Australia. These writers explicitly reject positivistic models of enquiry in education and social science and interpretative models which do not lead to action, in favour of critical enquiry linked to human action. Following Habermas, the goal of this enquiry is emancipation from traditional ways of thinking which impede effective action and effective development and communication.

As McKernan (1991) points out, the agenda for this kind of research endeavour is expressly political:

Critical action research is seen as a politically empowering process for participants; the struggle is for more rational, just and democratic forms of education. ... As a theoretical activity it invites teachers and other practitioners to consider not only the curriculum and other educational domains, but the totality of relationships within the social system and structure of the society in which they live and work. (p. 27)

In this process, Lewin's model of a spiral of planning, action, observation and reflection is nevertheless maintained.

Each of the models of action research can be and are used for improving teaching in higher education-indeed it is difficult to conceptualise them as totally separate. From our experience it is not always possible to begin a project using a critical emancipatory model of action research. It may be desirable to start action research projects with a small group of like-minded individuals who are teaching the same course so that the group can then reflect together on the progress of the project, and can together make changes to the course. It is not always possible to do this, however, as members of a department do not always share the same concerns about teaching and nor do they have a common wish to engage in action research. Individuals can still start worthwhile projects by using as sounding boards those from other departments or staff of an educational development unit. At some later stage in the project other staff from the department may wish to be become involved. Several of the case studies described in Experiences Sharing started with one lecturer each and, because of the enthusiasm of those individuals, have extended to wider circles within their departments.

Reflective Practice

A variant of action learning is reflective practice, which has become widely associated with the name of Donald Schon (1983; 1987). Schon has developed a model of professional practice which encourages teachers and other professionals to engage in reflection upon their actions as a means of solving problems encountered in practice.

Reflective practice, in Schon's terms, might be seen as a form of action research or action learning by the individual. Action research is normally envisaged as a collective and participative activity so that it can lead to change in social situations. Reflection-on-action can be an individual activity and may influence only the practices of the individual reflector.

Definition of Action Research

It might be useful to summarise the above discussion by providing a brief definition of action research. That of Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 165-166) would be widely accepted.

It can be argued that three conditions are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for action research to be said to exist: firstly, a project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a form of strategic action susceptible of improvement; secondly, 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; thirdly, 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.