

## Stages of an Action Research Project

Lewin (1946) outlined a set of procedures for action research in the context of social planning which are still adhered to today.

Planning usually starts with something like a general idea. For one reason or another it seems desirable to reach a certain objective. Exactly how to circumscribe this objective, and how to reach it is frequently not too clear. The first step then is to examine the idea carefully in the light of the means available. Frequently more fact finding about the situation is required. If this first period of planning is successful, two items emerge: namely, an 'overall plan' of how to reach the objective and secondly, a decision in regard to the first step of action. Usually this planning has also somewhat modified the original idea. ... The next period is devoted to executing the first step of the overall plan. (In Deakin University, 1988, The action research reader, p. 42)

More fact-finding is usually necessary at this stage, new insights develop and the next planning stage is corrected. The overall plan can be modified. The whole cycle can be described as planning, executing and fact finding and so on for each step.

Rational social management, therefore, proceeds in a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of action. (Lewin, 1952, pp. 462-463)

Basically the process of an action research project consists of a number of phases:

- [initial reflection](#)
- [planning](#)
- [action](#)
- [observation](#)
- [reflection](#)

Where possible or appropriate most projects go through several cycles or spirals of the basic phases. Like all descriptions of research endeavours, the action research spiral and the stages it describes are much more clear-cut than occurs in reality. Planning is seldom perfect, action reveals the need for further planning, backtracking occurs, and so on. Nevertheless it is useful to give an account of each phase separately in order to describe the action research process.

## Initial Reflection

### Reflect



Action research arises from a problem, dilemma, or ambiguity in the situation in which practitioners find themselves. It may be at the level of a general concern, a perceived need, or a course-related problem. For example:

1. The students seem to have great difficulty with the section of the course on financial management.
2. When they go on their clinical placements, students make little use of the theory we teach.
3. The assignments are mostly reproductions of lecture notes-there is little sign of any additional reading.

For a concern to be translated into an action research project, it needs to be made more concrete, so that it becomes susceptible to change or improvement. You need to devise a specific course of action, which you can try out, to see if it affects your original concern. More specific questions for the above concerns might be something like:

1. What changes could be made to the curriculum to clarify the relationship between financial management and the prerequisite skills which are needed?
2. Would different teaching techniques better prepare students for the clinical situation?
3. How can the assessment questions be changed so that additional reading is encouraged?

Preliminary observation and critical reflection is usually needed to convert a broad concern to an action theme. A concern does not often directly suggest the remedy: educational problems are not that simple.

The changes you might make will often fall into one of three categories:

- changes to the curriculum or syllabus
- modifications to teaching techniques or adoption of a new method
- changes to the nature of the assessment.

In some ways this stage is the most difficult as the problem needs to be sufficiently refined to be tractable and to ensure that the focus is on the most important issues. At the same time, you must avoid redefining the problem in such a way that the original concerns are not addressed adequately.

It is also important to recognise which problems or issues it is feasible to focus on in a project: in some cases a commonsense solution to a current difficulty can readily be found, while in others there may be institutional constraints which render attempts at solution beyond the scope of teaching staff. For example, it is not uncommon for problems related to teaching and learning to arise from course planning documents which may not be able to be changed for a given period of time, say until a course evaluation and revision is due.

Lastly, attention needs to be given to the timing of the project. For instance, given semester schedules and availability of students and staff, will it be possible to complete a cycle in the foreseeable future or would it be better to delay the project until a later date?

### Recording the Existing Situation

In action research you are aiming to promote change. To report the effects of the change you need a record of the situation before and after the change. What were the observations which promoted your concern? What are the current practices and the current situation? Some of the observation techniques described in the section Techniques for Observation can be used before and after a change takes place, to examine the effect of the action taken.

### Finding Relevant Literature

As part of your initial reflection, you should find out whether there is any relevant literature to aid your particular project. The educational literature is now so extensive that it is unlikely that there isn't.

You could save time reading numerous journal articles if you can locate a book or review relevant to your problem. The next short-cut is the ERIC educational database. Educational terminology is probably not as precise or tightly defined as in some other disciplines and you therefore need to experiment with key-words or combinations of key-words to locate the articles that you need.

In addition, don't forget the educational literature in your own subject area. Most disciplines have an educational journal such as the Journal of Chemical Education, or devote sections of general journals to educational topics.

## Planning



The most important outcome of the planning phase is a detailed plan of the action you intend to take or the change you intend to make. Who is going to do what, and by when? What are the proposed alterations to the curriculum? How do you intend to implement your revised teaching strategies? It is important to try to work out whether your plans are practicable and to consider how others might react to their implementation.

You also need to make plans for observation or monitoring your proposed changes. Look through the section on 'evaluation techniques' and decide which you will use and then prepare any questionnaires, interview schedules or other observation devices as appropriate. Seek any advice you need early! It is better to get help before you start gathering data, than to try to get help at the end in order to interpret information from poorly designed instruments.

## Action



Reality can be messy and unpredictable! In carrying out your plan, things will rarely go precisely as expected. Do not be afraid to make minor deviations from your plan in

the light of experience and feedback. Make sure that you record any deviations from your plan, and the reasons you made them.

Furthermore, it is in this phase that new insights are likely to arise. These can either be incorporated into your current project or recorded for future research.

## Observation



Detailed observation, monitoring and recording enables you to assess the effect of your action or intervention and hence the effectiveness of the proposed change. The observation techniques you can use are discussed in the next section.

In addition to the planned observations, all those involved in the action research project should keep a diary or journal where additional observations and insights are recorded on a regular basis.

## Reflection



Regular reflection within the project team is an integral feature of an action research project. Innovations can be fine-tuned as the activity proceeds if participants meet on a regular basis.

At the end of an action cycle it is particularly important to reflect critically on what has happened using the observations and notes made in diaries. How effective were your changes? What have you learnt? What were the barriers to change? How can you improve the changes you are trying to make in future?

Critical reflection can take place in isolation but it is usually more fruitful if takes place within small group discussions where ideas and impressions can be shared and where hopefully changes in attitude and practice in those concerned with the innovation can be brought about.

Many practices within higher education are strongly influenced by tacit conventions. Through participative critical reflection it is possible to expose these conventions and examine whether their observation is truly beneficial to the practices they influence. Often improvements to teaching and learning can only be brought about once any unhelpful conventions are exposed and participants move away from unconscious behaviour based upon these deep seated conventions.

As a result of this period of reflection, ideas will usually arise for a further cycle of action research: most people find that a second cycle is needed. However, such a cycle should arise naturally from the situation and the desire of participants to continue with the project. It would be pointless to continue with a further cycle when there appears to be no need to do so, or the researchers are unable to commit themselves to carrying it out.