# Unit 3: The Process and the Framework

## Overview

In this unit, you will learn about where action research questions come from. You will discover that action research questions originate from everyday situations that leaders confront and everyday discussions that leaders have. You will also learn about what a conceptual framework is and why it is important. A conceptual framework sets the stage in an action research project to let readers know who created the project and why you chose to conduct your study as you did.

### Topics

This unit is divided into the following topics:

1. Developing A Research Question
2. Conceptual Frameworks

### Learning Outcomes

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to:

* Develop and refine a viable research question for your action research project.
* Describe your conceptual framework.

### Activity Checklist

Here is a checklist of learning activities you will benefit from in completing this unit. You may find it useful for planning your work.

**Activity 3.1:** Read Chapter 3: Engaging in Action Research by Parsons et al., watch a video and reflect in your learning journal.

**Activity 3.2:** Review the action research portfolio exemplars and answer questions about your conceptual framework in your learning journal.

**Assessment:** Complete the discussion post and response.

### Resources

Here are the resources you will need to complete this unit.

* Parsons, J., Hewson, K., Adrian, L., & Day, N. (2013). Engaging in Action Research A Practical Guide to Teacher-Conducted Research for Educators and School Leaders. Brush Education Inc.
* Other online resources will be provided in the unit.

## Topic 1: Develop a Research Question

Where do research questions come from? Simply put, action research questions originate in discussions that leaders have about their collective needs as they work with their colleagues. Everyday situations that leaders confront should be the focus of action research. In fact, the best action research questions emerge as leaders talk with each other about what they see happening and how they believe organizations might be improved.

Certainly, individuals can reflect on the needs they discover as they lead. However, the best questions emerge as individuals bring these needs to a collective about what they experience. Leaders talk with each other all the time. However, to really focus together on action researchable issues, collective conversations might begin with the following questions:

1. What’s really working well for me? For us?
2. What could we do better?
3. What completely puzzles me (us)?
4. Why does this seem to happen? What’s your experience with it?
5. When things are working well, what’s different from when they aren’t working well?
6. How might we change things to make our organization or community better?
7. When this happens, what should I (we) do next?
8. How might we be able to make this happen?

**Strategies That Help Develop Research Questions**

Most good action research ideas emerge from the individual ideas of leaders but are developed through open-ended and creative conversations with others. Thus, it is useful to work both as an individual and as a collaborative team at the same time.

As an individual, you are both leading and thinking at the same time. Make a point of tracking your ideas in a systematic way that fits your own way of leading.

Individually: Keep a journal during the week.

• Here the word *journal* is used loosely—it might just be a space in your daily planner. However, it works best if you find a place where you can track your thoughts as they come up.

• At the end of the week, set aside some time to do two things: first, remember what spurred your thoughts during the week and take notes about your memories; second, read the ideas you have tracked in your journal, looking for significant ideas and themes.

Collaboratively: Find time for conversations with other leaders.

• Institute a regular practice of bringing your individual thoughts to a collaborative forum. Time and space for professional learning isn’t always part of the culture of organizations. Unless your organization is proactive in this regard, your team will simply have to find or create that space. Still, this practice is well worth the time.

• During these conversational spaces, do two things. First, share the notes you have written. Second, practice sharing thoughts with each other about what you are seeing both individually and collectively as part of your experience. Third, engage in courageous collegial conversations – respond with caring insight. In general, three questions should motivate your work:

1. What’s really working for me/us? How can what’s working be scaled out more widely?
2. What could I/we do better?
3. What puzzles me/us? How might we find answers?

The first step in developing an action research project is to develop research questions. Generally, questions are developed through collaborative conversations between colleagues. If this does not happen on a regular basis in your organization, here are some ideas about how to go about engaging in generative and collegial conversations.

If effective collaborative conversations are to take place, they must be created to become part of the cultural identity of an organization. After a while, these conversations become “the way things are done around here”; however, until they do, a number of rules can help these conversations become a reality.

**1.** Have positive conversations that focus on the issues you identify. Leadership can be stressful, and at times, it is easier to focus on its negative aspects*.* But negativity erodes enthusiasm. Try to focus—especially if there are problems—on how you might work together to consider and implement change. Keep your conversations issue-focused and solutions-driven.

**2.** Institute regular conversations. Conversations cannot be one-offs. For conversations to work, they must be revisited. As noted, they must become part of the organization’s culture.

**3.** Take notes or minutes. It matters less the shape of your notes than the existence of your notes. Keep notes and review them before the next conversations. This isn’t a formal process, but it’s an important one.

**4.** Share your conversations widely with others. Talk about what your team discussed during these conversations. The more ideas are shared, the more they become owned.

**5.** Act on your ideas. Do something about things. When conversations have action plans attached to them and leaders engage these plans, as small as these might be, the effectiveness of what happens becomes part of the conversations. Success is motivating: celebrate small victories.

#### Learning Activity 3.2: Read, Watch and Reflect

Your research question should signal what skill you would like to improve. It can be general as in: “How can I improve my leadership skills?” Or, it might help you to be more specific as in: “How can our organization better support each other through family difficulties?” To begin, you just need to identify the skill or area in which you would like to improve. Your guiding question should focus on self-change.

To begin this learning activity, read chapter 3: Starting a Research Plan in Engaging in Action Research by Parsons et al.

Next, watch the following video “[Finding My Research Question](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2w0OE1u2Y4)” by Margaret Reil. This video will help you find an overarching inquiry question for your action research. This question is generally focused on what you want to change-- How can I improve....

**\*Note to production: Use YouTube plugin to embed video.**

Finally, in your reflective learning journal, respond to the following questions:

* What challenges me?
* What keeps me up at night or appears as the most important issues when I think about going to work?
* What am I deeply curious about?
* How would I like to change? What would I like to be able to do or be?
* What are the changes I would be most proud of?
* If I could be more of an expert in one area, what would that area be? Why?

Next, try using the following three statements to help you get some clarity about what exactly you want to address in your question. If you can fill out these statements, then you most likely have a narrow enough topic with enough direction to perform some great research.

* **I am researching \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(What Topic?).**
* **Because I want to find out \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(So What? Issue/question).**
* **In order to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (Now What? Application/Purpose). [nice additions]**

*Note that the learning activities in this course are ungraded, unless specified. They are designed to help you succeed in your assessments in this course, so you are strongly encouraged to complete them.*

## Topic 2: Your Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is important because it helps both you and your readers understand who you are as a researcher and where you are coming from. A conceptual framework is a bit like a recipe or a blueprint, but it also includes information about the person who created that recipe or blueprint. It provides an outline of how you plan to conduct your research but it also tells readers why you chose to conduct your study as you did. It goes further than that by also positioning your work within the larger field of study.

Writing a conceptual framework can help guide your research and ensure that your research stays on track. It also gives you a lens through which to see the work you are doing.

For example, one simple different conceptual framework might include researching as a “teacher” vs. researching as a “principal.” Or, a CEO of a company would seek different answers than someone who might work in a front-line position. Another conceptual framework would be seeking solutions to problems already known vs. uncovering problems one believes might exist. Yet another would be “appreciative inquiry” (looking for what works) vs. critically examination (looking for what doesn’t work).

In short, there are many conceptual frameworks from which one can engage their own work. In the first sense, for a researcher, knowing your own conceptual framework helps you better understand whether data is pertinent. In the second sense, for a reader of research, knowing the researcher’s conceptual framework helps understand how to understand why the researcher made certain choices (and not others) during the research.

Writing a rich description requires paying attention to a number of factors. Some of these factors are not immediately apparent in the setting. The idea or goal is to give your readers a sense of what features of the setting will be important for understanding your action research.  
  
One set of resources is exploring how others have described their setting. Here is one example from work published on the Center for Collaborative Action Research:

* [Action Research Portfolio](https://sites.google.com/site/jlowskyactionresearch/fieldofaction)
* <https://amyatchison.wixsite.com/eportfolio/compilation>

#### Learning Activity 3.3: Review and Reflect

To begin this learning activity, review the action research portfolio links provided in Topic 2.

Next, in your reflective learning journal, describe the context of the problem or challenge you have selected without names or markers of identification. Your description should flow from one paragraph to the next. These questions are designed to help you think of what you might want to include. There may be other important details not listed here.

1.What prompted you to care about the problem you will be studying? What do hope to do as a result of your action research? Who is your audience: who will benefit from your work? What do you see happening “next,” after this part of your action research has been completed?

Example: *I am interested in finding out more about helping differently-abled people because my brother was differently-abled and I saw him struggle with many issues. I hope to provide information that would help influence policy and practice in this area. If I can discover some ways to advocate for others, I hope to be able to begin to build a community of practice among those who have chosen to work with differently-abled people.*

2.Where is your action research taking place? Describe the physical setting. You don’t have to provide the names of the place, just the characteristics.

Example: *My action research will take place in a 5th-grade classroom located in a small district in British Columbia. I have been teaching there for over a decade.*

3.What is the history of the problem in your setting, and is this a new, ongoing, or urgent problem? Describe rules and regulations that set boundaries and any economic or political issues that need to be understood by your readers.

Example: *The issue of compliance with core standards is new this year. To meet our deadline we will need to be compliant by September.*

4.Who will be involved (community roles-leaders) –both the people you will be working with directly and those that might be involved indirectly? Describe the norms and expected patterns of interaction and the basic demographics of the community where you will be working. You can indicate the roles and responsibilities of the people, without the use of real names.

Example: *Our company has three project groups. I work in one of these groups with six people. There are three senior people, (S1, S2. S3) with more than 10 years with the company) and two new hires (N2, and N3) each with less than 2 years and one intern (N2) who have just joined. The groups now work independently. My goal will be to increase the intergroup communication….*

5.What are the resources and assets you have available, and what have you done to this point? Will this be a new effort or a refinement of something you have been working? What is likely to happen if nothing is done?

Example: *The district is well aware of the problem of limited technology and is poised to support efforts to increase technology at our school. They will supply… Parents are also concerned and they have offered to….* . *While this solution is not ideal, if it is not tried, our students will have no exposure to learning with technology*.

This is your time to really develop your description skills. Describe what do you see, not what you think. Describe what happens in your workspaces. Avoid words like "I think" or "this person feels..." Tell us what you see taking place working towards an insider's objective view of the setting. Thinking about these dimensions might help you.

## Unit 3 Summary

In this unit, you have had an opportunity to learn where action research questions come from. You discovered that action research questions originate from everyday situations that leaders confront and everyday discussions that leaders have. You also learned what a conceptual framework is and why it is important.

## Assessment

### Discussion Post and Response:

After completing this unit, including the learning activities, you are asked to share your research question in a discussion post for your colleagues. As you share your research question, also discuss the following questions that help set the stage for your action research project:

* What do you care about?
* If you were going to write a question what would it be?

Next, you are asked to peer-review two of your colleague’s questions. Your peer review should be collegial and address issues like quality of the research question. Here are a few things to look for:

* Does the question address a clear problem with current practices or a clear need for improvement?
* Does the problem arises from the author’s own practice or from the needs of community members?
* Is the problem informed by examining current practices, talking with others in the setting, reading available literature, and gathering relevant information?
* Does the author actively reflect on his/her own professional development?

Please post your feedback for your colleagues in a reply post in the discussion forum. Your feedback should be approximately 250-300 words.

Please remember to:

* Be Kind: Always treat others with dignity and respect. Never use words that are hurtful, including sarcasm.
* Be Specific: Focus on particular strengths and weaknesses, rather than making general comments like “It’s good” or “I like it.” Provide insight into why it is good or what, specifically, you like about it.
* Be Helpful: The goal is to positively contribute to the individual or the group, not to simply be heard. Echoing the thoughts of others or cleverly pointing out details that are irrelevant wastes time.
* Participate: Peer critique is a process to support each other, and your feedback is valued!
* When critiquing a peer’s work, use “I” statements. For example, “I’m confused by this part,” rather than “This part makes no sense.”
* Use questions whenever possible. For example
  + I’m curious why you chose to begin with…?
  + Did you consider adding…?
  + What evidence do you have for...?
  + Remember the three important phrases:
  + "I notice...".
  + "I wonder...".
  + "If this were my work, I would...".

**Grading Rubric**

| **Criteria** | **Excellent** | **Good** | **Fair** | **Unacceptable** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Reasoning** | Arguments or positions are reasonable and supported with evidence from the readings. Often deepens the conversation by going beyond the text, recognizing implications and extensions of the text. Provides analysis of complex ideas that help deepen the inquiry and further the conversation. | Arguments or positions are reasonable and mostly supported by evidence from the readings. In general, the comments and ideas contribute to the group’s understanding of the material and concepts. | Contributions to the discussion are more often based on opinion or unclear views than on reasoned arguments or positions based on the readings. Comments or questions suggest a difficulty in following complex lines of argument or student’s arguments are convoluted and difficult to follow. | Comments are frequently so illogical or without substantiation that others are unable to critique or even follow them. Rather than critique the text the student may resort to ad hominem attacks on the author instead. |
| **Reading** | Student has carefully read and understood the readings as evidenced by oral contributions; familiarity with main ideas, supporting evidence and secondary points. Comes to class prepared with questions and critiques of the readings. | Student has read and understood the readings as evidenced by oral contributions. The work demonstrates a grasp of the main ideas and evidence but sometimes interpretations are questionable. Comes prepared with questions. | Student has read the material, but comments often indicate that he/she didn’t read or think carefully about it, or misunderstood or forgot many points. Class conduct suggests inconsistent commitment to preparation. | Student either is unable to adequately understand and interpret the material or has frequently come to class unprepared, as indicated by serious errors or an inability to answer basic questions or contribute to discussion. |

## Checking your Learning

Before you move on to the next unit, you may want to check to make sure that you are able to:

* Develop a viable research question for your action research project.
* Describe your conceptual framework.