# Unit 6: Create an Ethical Plan for Action Research

## Overview

In this unit, we will analyze the importance of an ethical research plan when conducting your action research project. This plan could be a simple as when to schedule a meeting with your principal or supervisor to share the details of your plan, or as complex as applying to have your work approved by a university or district's institutional review board. We will also explore how to turn your plans into action by reviewing the steps of the research process.

### Topics

This unit is divided into the following topics:

1. Ethics in Action Research
2. Writing an Ethics Application
3. How to Turn Plans into Action

### Learning Outcomes

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

* Explain the characteristics of an ethical research plan.
* Create an ethics application for your action research project.
* Apply the research process to turn plans into action.

### 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 6.1:** Watch,Read and Reflect

**Activity 6.2:** Create an Ethics Application

**Activity 6.3:** Read and Reflect

**Assessment:** Complete the Discussion Post and Ethics Application for Review.

### 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: Ethics in Action Research

Research plays two important roles for leaders. First, leaders can apply existing research to solve problems and lead well in complex situations; however, some problems are unique in a particular context, and new research is needed to address these issues. In this case, action researchers are knowledge generators. The reason is simple: their problems are particular to their context.

Although research ethics is crucial to conducting research, the ethical protections of outsider research (e.g., random selection, control groups, limiting the personal influence of the researcher) are either irrelevant or problematic in action research simply because action researchers are usually participants in their own research. Following the ethical principles of outsider research can impede the action researcher’s desire and need for collaborative communication and conversations with their participants.

That said, action research is bound by the common principles that guide the ways leaders engage with each other as professionals and work with their communities.

When planning any research project, the question of how to do your research must be coupled with a contemplation of research ethics and your legal obligations under the [*Freedom of Information and the Protection of Privacy Act*](https://www.oipc.bc.ca/guidance-documents/1466)(FOIP). Because action research is always collaborative and hangs on the discussion of what is happening at every turn, the ethical issues in which action researchers engage are too complex for simple rules or procedures. ***Action research is not a set of rules to follow***. It is a way of living as leader-researchers who engage in a contextual—time, space and insight— experience of people working together to create “good” (helpful to others) research.

The best way to engage action research is to be openly mindful of the ambiguities that confront us all within the complex life of organizations and to make the discussion of these ambiguities part of the work of action research. In some ways, although the purpose of action research is to help solve issues that leaders face, action research entails more than the attitude of “I see a problem. Let’s do some action research to solve it.” Instead, action researchers work with the attitude “***We see an issue. Let’s engage action research to help us make our understandings and actions clearer***.”

### Learning Activity 6.1: Watch, Read and Reflect

To begin this learning activity, watch the following video by Margaret Riel “[Plan for Action](https://youtu.be/xDlrmyNbMuw?t=300).” Watch until 8:18 and listen closely as she discusses Ethics in Action Research.

Next, watch the following video on the history of[**the Development of Guidelines for Research with Human Subjects**](https://youtu.be/-O5gsF5oyls)**.** This video will give a brief history of both the problems and guidelines for working with human participants; however; keep in mind that in action research is done *with* people and not *on* or *to* people.  You should be aware of the history of inappropriate research practices and the ethical procedures that all researchers follow to act ethically.  Most of these examples are medical, but the ethical practices apply to all research.

Finally, read the following short article on [*What is Ethics in Research and Why is it Important*](https://www.niehs.nih.gov/research/resources/bioethics/whatis/index.cfm), by David Resnik.  Although this article is talking about all forms of research and not action research, it does help you think about ethical issues in general that apply to all forms of research.

After watching these videos and reading the article, record your responses to the following questions in your reflective learning journal:

[Consider breaking these questions up and putting a few after each activity above]

* How might the intended changes from your action research project affect others?
* Who should you share your project with—both the process and the findings?
* How does this action research project express an ethic of caring for others?
* In whose interests are the changes you are proposing being made? Who will benefit? How will they benefit?
* Why are you collecting the information?
* What information will be collected?
* How will the information be used?
* Who will be the audience for the information?
* Might there be any harm to any participant as a result of collecting this information? If so, what?

*Note that you will be asked to identify the ethical issues in your research project in this unit’s graded assessment when you are writing your ethics application.*

## Topic 2: Writing an Ethics Application

When you conduct your action research project, you need to have an ethical plan. Because your research represents Trinity Western University, it means your research actions are the University’s research actions. This makes your ethical plan and actions worthy of oversight. The University’s Institutional Review Board is there *help* and *guide* you in the ethical planning process.

##### **Goals of Action Research**

One goal of action research is to improve your role as a community organizer, leader, and team player. If you focus on your role within your organization and include a discussion of how you will be evaluating the effectiveness of your actions, then your efforts in collecting data can be understood as part of this larger goal. This approach allows you to share your research without eliciting concerns that are more central to experimental forms of research.

##### **Your Research Plan**

The focus of your research plan needs to center on what type of data you plan to collect and analyze, and how you can assure others that no harm will result from your process. If there are risks, these need to be clearly described, and you will need informed consent from adults and from parents of children younger than 18.   
  
**Informed Consent in Action Research**

You will need to tell others how any data you collect from them will be used and how you plan to protect their privacy. If you are collecting data that is outside of the usual requirements of your job, you may need to have informed consent; however, not all data collection falls in this category. For example, a teacher can evaluate student learning using data, because this data collection process is part of normal classroom activities. It would not make sense to give students the choice to opt out of their teacher evaluating them. However, if students are going to be asked to evaluate your teaching, you are likely to need parent permission to collect this data with plans on how to protect identity and privacy. 

##### **Developing an Ethical Plan**

Action research is often focused on learning how to improve your practice, as you are the primary object of the research. However, if you are collecting data that steps out of the normal processes of your work, you may need to consider getting formal approval. It is always a good idea to share what you are doing with the person or organization that supervises your work. They will help you decided what level of consent or permission you might need. This process is to protect you as much as it is to protect those with whom you work.

In general, for any research it is important to consider the following:

**[Create H5P dialog cards to present this material.]**

* Confidentiality: The use of real names of people and places should be protected by using fictional names of initials unless otherwise negotiated and agreed. Also, it needs to be clear to all who will have access to the evidence you are collecting and what will be done it.
* Openness: It is important to be as clear and honest in conducting your research. Working with students you should share your overall inquiry goal-- "I am working on strategies to improve the way I teach reading and I will want to know if what I try is helping you."   or "I am exploring new strategies to engage you in math. "  But in general, you should strive to share information, outcomes, tools, resources and be ready to listen carefully to what others say about the actions you are taking.
* Informed and Engaged: Everyone involved in the research has an equal right to be informed. If an event or decision affects them, they need to know about it and be involved in the process. The social process is very important in action research and the goal is group transformation.
* Voluntary: If you are asking others to provide information that his not routinely done, then you should be clear that they have the right to opt out of the process. But if it is a school activity, then you will not want to make participation voluntary.
* Respect for Colleagues: In action research, the research is done with people not on people. You are the subject of your action research and others are helping you make sense of the actions you put in place.  It is important to listen and work fairly with the people are engaged in the activity system of your action research.

If your action research involves working with minors and the change you want to make is not a normal part of your work, then parental consent is necessary.  If you are working in an area which is clearly part of your job, then an informational letter is sufficient.  For example, if you plan to engage students in service learning, you need to have signed parental consent. If you are exploring the use of a different strategy to exchange or motivate learning in your classroom, you might only need to send an "informational" letter home describing your plans to parents and inviting their observations of learning from home. Here are some [examples of information letters](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1djzj0btnm96Sx2PT_iGW0fM-Pm5142BG5TIQLYn5Ip0/edit?usp=sharing).

If you are engaging in action research as an individual, it is important to be in regular interaction with those you work for and with to make sure that you are working within the ethical framework of your organization.

You may engage in action research in a business setting.  Kirk Hanson, the Director of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics provides a framework for thinking about ethical decision making in the following video [What is Ethics? What is Business Ethics?](https://youtu.be/vmVu66Fpd9U)

Ethical issues for the social sector--nonprofits, philanthropists, and foundations--arise in operations, leadership, fundraising, and working with the public. The Assistant Director of Social Sector Ethics Joan Harrington describes how the Center approaches dilemmas including conflicts of interest, leadership failures, and the diversion of assets in the following video [What is social sector ethics?](https://youtu.be/xYTNWdmNiek)

### Learning Activity 6.2: Create an Ethics Application

When engaging in action research as a student in a MA Leadership program, your university will have a review board (often called the Research Ethics Review Board) which will oversee the work of all people who are associated with the university.

For this learning activity you will use the following templates to create your own information and consent letters for your action research project. Complete the following templates found here: Information and Consent Letters Templates **[add hyper-link to TWU information and consent letters]**

Next, complete the appropriate Research Ethics Board application form for your project found here: <https://www.twu.ca/research/research-services/research-ethics/create-hreb-application>. Your instructor will provide you guidance and specific feedback on what form you should complete.

## Topic 3: How to Turn Plans into Actions

As soon as you have completed your methods – that is, how you will conduct your action research project – you are ready to complete the ethics review form. The two go hand-in-hand. You need to know the steps you will take to conduct your action research and the ethics review board needs to know as well. As noted earlier, those steps guide your work and prove to others that your work will be done within the ethical policies that rightly exist.

### Learning Activity 6.3: Read and Reflect

For this learning activity, read Chapter 6: From Plan to Action in Engaging in Action Research by Parsons et al.

Next, in your reflective learning journal answer the following questions:

* When you read and consider your action research question, is it really the central question you want to ask and answer?
* How exactly will you track your work as the research is occurring? Are you physically prepared? Do you have the tools you need?
* Understanding that things seldom go exactly as planned, in what ways are you ready to make the changes you will need to make if things don’t work? Who’s your go-to person for asking questions if you’re stuck?
* What positive benefits do you believe right now that your action research project might have?
* When your project has been completed, who should you share your findings with?
* How does this action research project express an ethic of caring for others?
* Even before you begin your project, given what you know now, what do you see happening next?

### Learning Activity 6.4: Case Studies

There are four major ethical issues when anyone conducts research: a) Respect for Persons, b) Beneficence (Do no harm), c) Respect for anonymity and confidentiality, and d) Justice. Read the following case studies and answer the questions that follow.

**[Maybe this could be an interactive H5P activity?]**

**Case Study #1: Respect for Persons (Informed Consent)**

A research project examining the dental hygiene practices of children in a rural community in Southern India is under way. The purpose of this study is to look at the effectiveness of an educational program about oral hygiene to improve hygiene practices among children between the ages of 5-10. Both the local Research Ethics Board (REB) and the university REB have approved this research and the consent process.

During a routine monitoring visit for this study, the lead investigator observes the consent process for several study participants. The lead investigator finds that the research assistants administering the informed consent do the explanation quickly without ensuring that parents understand what will happen to their children. One research assistant notes that he believes the parents will defer to authority anyway and, because he’s absolutely convinced the research will benefit the children, why does it matter? As a result, not all of the information on the consent form has been explained to the parents, as was planned at the staff training.

In fact, when a script is sought it was found that none exists. Some explanations are different than others. Furthermore, most of the consent form is paraphrased and several essential elements are omitted. All the parents signed the consent form.

When the research assistants are questioned about this, they state that the parents at this site are not capable of understanding everything in the consent form, so they have agreed to emphasize only the most important aspects of the consent form. The lead investigator does not feel that the research assistants were following the informed consent process correctly.

After reading this case study, answer the following questions:

**1. What is informed consent?**

**2. Reflect on what went wrong and what could change.**

**3. Should the investigator report her findings to the REB?**

**Case Study #2: Do No Harm – Minimize risks and Maximize Benefits (Beneficence)**

An exercise study is being conducted with young women with mental health concerns. The goal of the study is to assess the impact of a 12-week exercise program on young women’s self-reported mental health. The women in the study will be randomly assigned to one of two groups 1) a 12-week exercise program that is supervised by experienced personal trainers or 2) a control group (no exercise). All the participants will complete surveys on depression, anxiety, stress, and body image at three different time points: the beginning, at 6-weeks and at 12-weeks. The principal investigator explains that women in are very enthusiastic about participating in the study, because it would provide them free access to a specialized exercise program.

The randomized groups are selected and the first round of measurement was completed as planned at baseline and at 6-weeks. Preliminary data analysis revealed that the participants in the exercise group were reporting improved scores in the four different mental health measures, whereas those in the control group were either staying the same or declining.

There is concern that only having one group participate in the exercise program may be having a negative effect on the control group participants. In addition, there are questions about the availability and affordability of the specialized exercise program after the conclusion of the study, even if the study is successful.

After reading this case study, answer the following questions:

**1. What is the definition of beneficence?**

**2. What do you think is the best way to proceed?**

**Case Study #3: Treat People Fairly (Justice)**

Many years ago, a large drug company advertised for volunteers for Phase I clinical trials of new drug agents. They noticed as the weather turned cold, middle-aged persons who were dirty and poorly-dressed volunteered, and that the number of volunteers increased yearly. The volunteers were housed in a metabolic unit for 6 months and were given a number of agents in sequence during the winter. Each trial was approved by an "in house" REB.

When it became known that many of the volunteers were homeless alcoholics, screening tests were done to ensure that chemistries were normal or near normal. Each volunteer signed a consent indicating that their compensation would be provided to them at the end of the period of being a control and that they would refrain from alcohol for the duration of their stay.  
  
The company believed sincerely that it was helping these individuals. The process was revealed in the media after some years.  
  
After reading this case study, answer the following questions:

1. **What is the definition of justice?**
2. **Was anything troublesome happening here?**
3. **If you believe so, then what do you think went wrong and what could have changed?**

**Case Study #4: Privacy and Confidentiality**

Dr. Parsons and Dr. Strong, academics from Trinity Western University, are beginning a large multi-site study examining servant leadership in school administrators across BC. The study will collect data from a large group of volunteers in various school districts across BC.

The first phase of the study will include a survey sent to all teachers in BC to identify examples of servant leadership in administrative positions. The second phase of the study will be to interview those identified as servant leaders and compare them to a control group who score low on the servant leadership survey. As part of the study, the participants must agree that they will never share the results of the servant leadership survey.

Dr. Strong enters all the demographic data for each participant who completed the survey into her laptop computer that she carries with her back and forth to work because she works remotely. In addition, she makes hard copies of these data, which she keeps in her locked file cabinet at home as a backup, just in case something should happen to her laptop.

Because of Dr. Strong’s busy workday, family commitments, and long commute to work, she needs to take her laptop with her so she can continue her research on the go. On one of these evenings, Lisa, her neighbor and close friend, rushes in to ask Dr. Strong for a special favor. She is desperate to borrow Dr. Strong’s laptop for only a few hours because her computer isn’t working and she has a vital assignment to complete for the next day.

Dr. Strong agrees to help her friend, and gives her the computer. By this time, the computer is in sleep mode, with the lid closed. Dr. Strong doesn’t realize that she has neither exited her participant database, nor shut down her computer.

When Lisa activates the computer, Dr. Strong’s teacher registry appears on the screen, with the genders, ages, and addresses of local teachers and administrators. Some of the addresses are familiar to Larissa as she works at city hall. She is concerned because she appreciates the sensitivity of the situation, and so she returns the computer immediately to Dr. Strong. They discuss whether Dr. Strong needs to notify the REB that Lisa accessed the database.

After reading this case study, answer the following questions:

**1. How do you define privacy?**

**2. How do you define confidentiality?**

**3. What precautions should have be taken to protect these data?**

**4. Should Dr. Strong be permitted to let a neighbor borrow this university computer?**

**5. Should Dr. Strong disclose to the REB that a neighbor accessed the database to her study?**

**6. Does the FIPAA Privacy Officer/Board need to know about any of this?**

## Unit 6 Summary

In this unit, you have had the opportunity to learn about developing an ethical plan for your action research project as well as creating an ethics application for the research ethics review board. We also explored how to turn your plans into action by reviewing the steps of the research process.

## Assessment

### Discussion Post and Response:

After completing this unit, including the learning activities, you are asked to share some information on the ethical issues that you will be faced with in your action research project and how you plan to mitigate them. Share these ideas in a discussion post for your colleagues.

There are four major ethical issues when anyone conducts research: a) Informed consent, b) Beneficence- Do no harm, c) Respect for anonymity and confidentiality, and d) Respect for privacy.

Write a paragraph response for each of these four major ethical issues. What possibilities might exist either during or after your action research project that could cause problems for your participants?

### Assignment: Submit your Ethics Application for Peer-review Feedback

[I will add more instructions here once I have these details sorted out with the HREB at TWU].

## Checking your Learning

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

* Explain the characteristics of an ethical research plan.
* Create an ethics application for your action research project.
* Apply the research process to turn plans into action.