The Learning Organization

Emerald Article: The concept of action research
Herbert Altrichter, Stephen Kemmis, Robin McTaggart, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

For Authors:
If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service.
Information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit
www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com
With over forty years' experience, Emerald Group Publishing is a leading independent publisher of global research with impact in
business, society, public policy and education. In total, Emerald publishes over 275 journals and more than 130 book series, as
well as an extensive range of online products and services. Emerald is both COUNTER 3 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is
a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive
preservation.

The concept of action research

Herbert Altrichter
Stephen Kemmis
Robin McTaggart and
Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

The authors

Herbert Altrichter is Professor and Head of Department of Education and Psychology at the University of Linz, Austria.
Stephen Kemmis is Director of Stephen Kemmis Research and Consulting P/L and Professor Emeritus of the University of Ballarat, Australia.
Robin McTaggart is Professor and Pro-Vice Chancellor, Staff Development and Student Affairs, at James Cook University, Townsville, Northern Queensland, Australia.
Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt is Director of OZI (Ortrun Zuber International P/L), Adjunct Professor at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, and Professor of Professional and Organisational Development in the UK-based International Management Centres Association (IMCA).

Abstract

Action research has been recognised for its breadth as a field of research practice and its depth as a discourse of theoretical insight. It does not have one neat, widely accepted definition. Points to some reasons for the difficulty of formulating a generally accepted definition of action research, and argues why action research should not be confined but should be both clarified for communication and open for development. The discussion stems from a working definition developed with participants in an international symposium that serves as a classic definition of action research. Presents several alternative approaches to resolution and argues for a judicious mix of pragmatism and flexibility in approaching the definition issue.

Introduction

Action research has proven its utility, with growing recognition of its breadth as a field of research practice and its depth as a discourse of theoretical insight. Yet while gaining recognition internationally, action research does not have one neat, widely accepted definition. It is, after all, a very broad movement. The First International Symposium on "Action Research in Industry, Government and Higher Education" in Brisbane in 1989 and the subsequent five World Congresses on "Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management" (ALARPM) have made it clear that there is some demand for a handy definition of action research that explains its conceptual framework and how this can be used.

Action research by its very nature seeks to explain the pedagogical assumptions of the researchers (participants) and their research project. So it is not surprising that many have focussed their investigative lens on action research as a concept. The literature on action research is rich in useful definitions. Yet none of these has gained pre-eminence in the field. It is thus useful to clarify the concept of action research and to explore the definitional problem. In this paper we take up both tasks. We present several definitions put forward by others and propose a definition that we have produced ourselves after extensive thought, feedback and refining. However, we maintain that action research must be both clarified for communication and open for ongoing consideration since confinement in narrow, restrictive definitions could serve to inhibit useful conceptual development.

Defining action research

We find this definition by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988, p. 5) generally very helpful:

> Action research is a form of collective, self-reflective inquiry that participants in social situations undertake to improve: (1) the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices; (2) the participants' understanding of these practices and the situations in which they carry out these practices. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, parents, workplace colleagues, social activists or any other community members – that is, any group with a shared concern and the motivation and will to address their shared concern. The

approach is action research only when it is collaborative and achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.

Participants in the First International Symposium in Brisbane offered various definitions that they had found useful. The Symposium participants sought to work towards a more open definition of action research that would attract general consent. But it was also recognised that rather than one fixed definition, a broadly accepted approach to defining action research would be the best response to the definition problem. This response is consistent with the flexible, pragmatic, collective response to problem solving that action research advocates. Here we try to synthesise some of the major elements in the discussion of the definitional problem.

In traditional philosophy, a "definition" seeks to capture the essence of an object by relating it to its genus proximum (i.e. the closest superordinate class) and naming its differentia specifica (i.e. specific difference from other species within this class). Philosophical analysis has aimed to establish what an object is essentially by "getting hold of the correct and eternally true account of it" (Barrow and Milburn, 1986, p. 15). But rather than following this post-Platonian essentialism, one might ask: "What is the purpose of a definition?" One could also ask why define, since this opens us to recognising the potentially restrictive nature of traditional "scientific"/pseudo-scientific approaches to research. Answering this question alerts us to the usually hidden or at least unobserved constraints that shape our research questions – why, what, how and who we ask – and similarly shape our answers. Asking the "why define?" question is a crucial means that enables us, as action research advocates, to move thoughtfully beyond the paradigm dominant in our research field and begin with our own questions, problems and understandings that are different from those of mainstream approaches. Instead of defining/controlling, this enables us to set up malleable parameters to open up and release.

Definitions have pragmatic, descriptive and normative functions in research. They are pragmatic in that they help communication in cases where the participants do not have a shared meaning of something, whether or not they have shared experience of it. Definitions are descriptive in that they record a usual

(culturally and historically located) use of language. They are normative in that they inherently involve the definer's attempt to include some phenomena into the meaning of a communicated term and exclude others. These are preconditions for the communicative function of a definition and they are thus useful in providing a basis for the critique and development of a concept.

In the following discussion we focus on:
- the encounter of cultures and the adaptation of definitions;
- some limitations on definitions;
- two parts of a definition: axiomatic and empirical;
- two working definitions; and
- an action research model.

The encounter of cultures and the adaptation of definitions

During the Brisbane Symposium, McTaggart (1996) recounted his experience of collaboration with participants from an indigenous culture quite different from that with which he was familiar. His anecdote hit home not only that action research derives from the western cultural contexts of their creators. It also highlighted how the western action researcher who at the beginning of a project is usually more experienced with research strategies and techniques than other participants, must be prepared to "give away" or share their knowledge of action research, which is anyway what action research advocates as part of the collaborative research process. Since this researcher is likely to have little opportunity to develop deep understanding of the other participants' culture, he or she needs to work creatively to encourage the other participants – by and for whom the research project is largely conducted – to "reshape", to "remake", to "reconstitute" action research in ways that make sense within the participants' culture while retaining the philosophical features familiar to the researcher.

In the face of striking cultural differences, the appropriate attitude towards identifying the meaning of concepts seems to be incremental rather than normative. The emphasis here is not on the clear-cut definitions that some researchers use for what may be labelled "non-action research" or "limited versions of action research". It is on

offering support for developing the idea and practice of action research, in ways useful to people within the host culture. This cross-cultural approach aims to create space for participants from the host culture to develop their own self-reflective practice informed by action research philosophy rather than to control the practice or at least the naming and framing of practice.

"Culture" occupies a prominent position in Holly's personal account of developing action research over two decades from the mid-1970s. He views action research as an innovation "offered" to schools (Holly, 1996). Characteristically, in the process of accepting innovations, teachers and schools further transform these innovations. Like other innovations, action research has been transformed in the process of being adapted to the needs of the school setting. Holly conceives the process of innovation as a "meeting of cultures". "Culture" for Holly differs from McTaggart's (1996) notion. In Holly's usage, culture does not denote different ethnicities but different systems of thought and action developed in relatively unrelated places within one society.

Action research as innovation in this context represents a "culture" that is brought into relationship with the culture within a school system or classroom, to which it is at first potentially alien. Arguably, the attitude of someone bringing action research to schools should be similar to that which McTaggart advocates for the "western action researcher":

> ... since neither can be sure to have fully understood the "host culture" and since both are only "temporary guests" who do not have to live with the long-term effects of the innovation, their stance should be modest and supportive, "giving away" action research to be used and transformed by the "host culture" for its own good rather than monitoring the process to prevent the concept from being "damaged" or "misconstrued" or to protect its conceptual purity from "contamination" or "dilution".

Holly (1996) argued that:

> too purist a definition (of action research) is disenfranchising

for example, when teachers introduce an action research project it is difficult for them to meet rigorous requirements of "participation" and "collaboration" at the start. Insisting on rigour or dismissing the evolving research project as a "limited form of action research" could turn off newcomers

altogether, instead of giving them the chance to develop their research approach as they become more familiar with the philosophy and methodology of action research. The move can therefore sacrifice the potential for both the practice of action research and the development of new practitioners who could in the longer term contribute to developing the approach.

Definitions are rooted in specific cultures – ethnic, social, political and others – that give definitions particular meaning and significance. To understand and be understood in other cultures, we must do more than produce a literal, translation of the idea into the language and cultural frameworks of the new culture. The idea must be appropriated in an active process of deconstructing old definitions and models and of reconstructing and re-enacting them in relation to the settings, circumstances, values and interests of the "host culture". Thus, an understanding is gradually developed that can be expressed in meanings and practices indigenous to the specific context. This means that for a definition to fulfil its "pragmatic function", its "normative function" must not be defended too closely.

Some limitations

Not every useful and valuable change process needs to be re-described in the terms put forward by action research, as Kemmis (1996) has argued. This is a particular approach to particular kinds of problems, not some kind of panacea for all problems of social practice. It calls for intellectual clarity and honesty to develop a fairly clear idea of what one is talking about. This always means that other approaches to improving social practices, social settings and our understanding of social life, although perhaps appealing in other respects, must be excluded from a specific discourse.

Action research aims to develop practical situations and competencies of the participants without substantively prescribing objectives to be achieved. The general aims of action research are frequently expressed in terms of process criteria (e.g. participation and emancipation) and it seems worthwhile to continue to stress these characteristics to differentiate action research from other approaches to understanding and creating

social change. Clearly, action research will continue to develop. Part of doing research is researching research, as the research task is inherently epistemic. Developing our knowledge about and competency in action research therefore remains necessary; we must avoid behaving as if doing action research were no more than administering a prescribed strategy. This developmental orientation lies at the very heart of action research and valid definitions of action research acknowledge and bear out this orientation.

The central problem with definitions of action research seems to be the potential incongruity between two of its key aspects – intellectual clarity and developmental orientation. So it is important to consider how intellectual clarity (which seems to be necessarily exclusive at any given time) can be achieved without harming the overall developmental orientation that action research aims to promote and embodies itself (and which must necessarily be open to inclusions). In the following section two attempts at reconciliation are presented for discussion.

Two parts of a definition: axiomatic and empirical

Inspired by Paul Feyerabend's writings, Altrichter (1996) reconstructed action research for his faculty's practical work, as a research program with two distinct parts:
(1) an "axiomatic part", indicating what is meant by action research; and
(2) an "empirical part", presenting an inventory of "rules of thumb" that collects reflected research experiences of action researchers.

The first part that clarifies meaning is a pragmatic means for communication in the sense that it aims to prevent irrelevant research experiences from being inserted into the inventory of rules. The formulation for the first part is to be as short and clear as possible, using familiar terms. It is finite and relatively static; thus, it should not be so narrow that the need to alter and modify the definition arises continually. However, the breadth of the definition is eventually a strategic question: the broader the field and the more areas it covers (i.e. the more people who are potentially attracted), the more difficult it becomes to argue concretely and incisively the strengths of action research, and the more competition with other research programs is to be expected.

The second, empirical, part consists of a collection of various researchers' reflected research experiences. It is as extensive as publication length allows and is open-ended and dynamic. Its message is clear: in doing research, action researchers test the inventory of rules, a process that modifies, augments and further develops these rules.

The axiomatic part
The following description of action research is a concrete example used in the first session of an introductory course into action research. The "definition" consists of just three points (what we are talking about):
(1) action research is about people reflecting upon and improving their own practice;
(2) by tightly inter-linking their reflection and action; and
(3) making their experiences public to other people concerned by and interested in the respective practice.

The empirical part
The "inventory of rules" is potentially infinite. So participants (e.g. at the beginning of the course) can be provided only with an instructive selection. What rules are included in this selection is the response to a pragmatic question of how to enhance learning under specific circumstances rather than a matter of principle. We consider it most appropriate at the beginning of an action research course to come forward with a mixture of rules that make concrete some of the general orientations of action research and others that give down-to-earth hints for research strategies.

When you are starting your research project the following experiences of other action researchers might give you some orientation. Remember, however, that these experiences have to be tested and developed through your own research:
· development in a democratic context is sustainable only if it is participatory;
· development in a democratic context is sustainable only if the process emancipates the participants;
· to avoid frustration and loss of data it is recommended that instruments be tested

in a situation similar to the research situation; and

· to ensure collaboration of the participants in the long term it is necessary to acknowledge that they have "ownership of their data".

It might be striking that some of the most fundamental features of action research (e.g. participation, emancipation) and virtually all its ethical considerations (e.g. democratic context, ownership) are included in the empirical inventory of rules. This might seem a weak mode of defining what is important with regard to action research; to some it may seem tautological. However, we suggest that this way has its own strengths. These statements are rightly in the empirical part, first because they have some supporting evidence and second because action research is partly about exploring these statements in practice and perhaps developing them further. They are not preconditions for action research but are matters for research in themselves. For example, ethical considerations define circumstances that are practically conducive to research and the development of knowledge. Unethical research can hamper the availability of information, thus undermining its own basis.

Working definitions

From here we present two working definitions of action research that are even more pragmatic. One is a product of public discussion and the other is to inform public discussion.

As frequently happens in the first phases of action research workshops or projects, a working definition of the term "action research" was needed at the beginning of the Brisbane Symposium but none of the existing definitions could satisfy all participants. None of the definitions discussed could accommodate the diverse experiences – reading about, reflecting on, and practising action research – that all participants had brought with them. Nevertheless, some shared understanding was necessary as a basis for discussion. In an interesting process of structured discussion the participants

gradually elaborated a working definition on a piece of flip chart paper that by the end of the discussion obviously reflected some shared concerns of the conference participants. Even though some definitional questions remained unresolved there was agreement that projects satisfying these conditions could be considered as "action research".

Table I presents the working definition authored jointly by the participants at the Brisbane International Symposium on Action Research in 1989, which has frequently been cited from the proceedings (now out of print) and which still serves us as one classic definition of action research.

We suggest this working definition was acceptable to the full range of Symposium participants because it is:

· not too threatening to existing understandings and practices;

· not so vague that any process of enquiry can be labelled "action research";

· rather rich in examples that can support the development of shared meanings;

· open enough to allow further elaboration and development;

· allows for an *ex post facto* incorporation of projects into the discussion (that was not initiated and conducted on the basis of some elaborate understanding of action research); and

· above all, collaborative with respect to the process of its formulation for a specific context.

The Internet is now a popular medium for fast access to information. For the Fifth World Congress on ALARPM in September 2000, a concise explanation of action research was posted in a special edition of the electronic newsletter of the University of Ballarat, the venue of the Congress. The newsletter was distributed to all University staff via e-mail and we present it here as the Appendix.

An action research model

As indicated above, these two working definitions are pragmatic - the first (Table I) as a product of public discussion at an international symposium, the second (Appendix) to inform public discussion at a world congress. Another pragmatic form of defining and explaining action research is a

Table I Working definition of action research

If yours is a situation in which
- people reflect on and improve (or develop) their *own* work and their *own* situations
- by tightly inter-linking their reflection and action; and
- also making their experience public not only to other participants but also to other persons interested in and concerned about the work and the situation, i.e. their (public) theories and practices of the work and the situation;

and if yours is a situation in which there is increasingly
- data-gathering by participants themselves (or with the help of others) in relation to their own questions;
- participation (in problem-posing and in answering questions) in decision-making;
- power-sharing and the relative suspension of hierarchical ways of working towards industrial democracy;
- collaboration among members of the group as a "critical community";
- self-reflection, self-evaluation and self-management by autonomous and responsible persons and groups;
- learning progressively (and publicly) by doing and by making mistakes in a "self-reflective spiral" of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, replanning, etc.;
- reflection which supports the idea of the "(self-)reflective practitioner";

then

yours is a situation in which *action research* is occurring

diagrammatical model as a spiral of cycles (Figure 1), each consisting of four moments or phases in action research:
(1) planning;
(2) acting;
(3) observing; and
(4) reflecting.

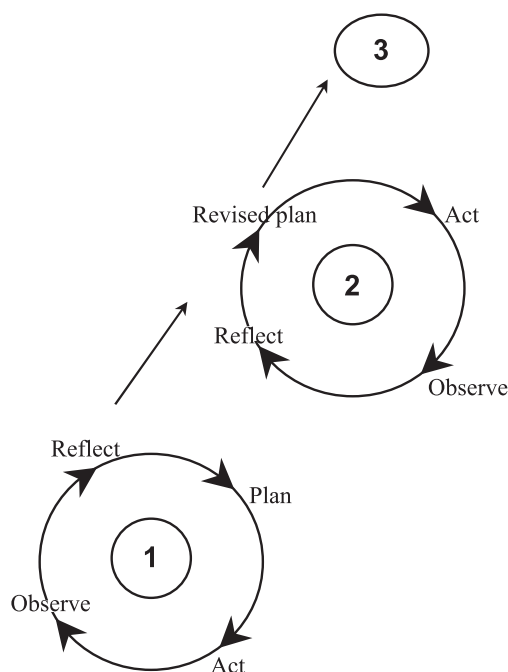This model is based on Kurt Lewin's work, explicated by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). It is a simple, helpful model of the

Figure 1 The spiral of action research cycle

Source: Zuber-Skerritt (2001, p. 15)

continuous and iterative process. It involves research and development, intellectual inquiry and practical improvement, reflection and action.

Conclusion

Action research is enquiry with people, rather than research on people. Because it includes investigation of the pedagogical assumptions of the researchers (participants) and their research project, many have attempted to explain or define it. The working definitions of action research presented in this paper are a few of many general frameworks. They have been used by many action researchers for more than a decade. We believe that these definitions indicate the nature, philosophy and methodology of action research, especially through discussion presented in this paper. Further references on action research are included in subsequent papers in this journal issue.

Action research is inclusive in its relationship with many other research frameworks. Thus, while it is important to attempt definition and clarification for communication, it is also important to acknowledge that action research must remain open for ongoing consideration since confining it within narrow, restrictive definitions could serve to inhibit constructive conceptual development.

References

Altrichter, H. (1996), "Do we need an alternative methodology for doing alternative research?", in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (Ed.), *Action Research for Change and Development*, Avebury, Aldershot, pp. 79-92.

Barrow, R. and Milburn, G. (1986), *A Critical Dictionary of Educational Concepts*, Wheatsheaf, Brighton.

Dick, B. (1991), *Action Research and Evaluation*, Interchange, Brisbane.

Holly, P. (1996), "From action research to collaborative enquiry: the processing of an innovation", in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (Ed.), *Action Research for Change and Development*, Avebury, Aldershot, pp. 36-56.

Kemmis, S. (1996), "Improving education through action research", in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (Ed.), *Action Research for Change and Development*, Avebury, Aldershot, pp. 57-75.

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (Eds) (1988), *The Action Research Planner*, 3rd ed., Deakin University Press, Geelong, Victoria.

McTaggart, R. (1996), "Action research for aboriginal pedagogy: improving teaching via investigating learning", in Zuber-Skerritt, O. (Ed.), *Action Research for Change and Development*, Avebury, Aldershot, pp. 157-78.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1992), *Professional Development in Higher Education: A Theoretical Framework for Action Research*, Kogan Page, London.

Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2001), "Action learning and action research: paradigm, praxis and programs", in Sankaran, S., Dick, B., Passfield, R. and Swepson, P. (Eds), *Effective Change Management Using Action Research and Action Learning: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes and Applications*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore, Australia, pp. 1-20.

Further reading

Altrichter, H., Posch, P. and Somekh, B. (2000), *Teachers Investigate Their Work: An Introduction to the Methods of Action Research*, 4th reprint, Routledge, London.

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (2000), "Participatory action research", in Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA, pp. 567-607.

Sankaran, S., Dick, B., Passfield, R. and Swepson, P. (Eds) (2001), *Effective Change Management Using Action Research and Action Learning: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes and Applications*, Southern Cross University Press, Lismore.

Appendix. What is action research?

Defining action research in a few paragraphs in a newsletter is fraught with risk in an academic setting but hopefully the words selected below are both useful and sufficiently general to avoid contention.

Action research is described by one source (Dick, 1991) as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time. In most of its forms it does this by action and critical reflection and in the later cycles, continuously refining methods, data and interpretation in the light of the understanding developed in the earlier cycles.

Another source (Zuber–Skerritt, 1992) generalises on the forms of action research that have evolved:

> All adopt a methodical, interactive approach embracing problem identification, action planning, implementation, evaluation, and reflection. The insights gained from the initial cycle feed into planning of the second cycle, for which the action plan is modified and the research process repeated.

For this source, other distinctive features of action research are:

> Critical collaborative enquiry by reflective practitioners who are accountable in making the results of their enquiry public, self-evaluative in their practice, and engaged in participative problem-solving and continuing professional development (i.e. the CRASP model).

According to this view, action research is critical in the sense that practitioners not only look for ways to improve their practice ... but are also critical change agents of those constraints, and of themselves. It is reflective in that participants analyse and develop concepts and theories about their experiences. Action researchers are accountable in that they aim to make their learning process and its results public. . . . Their practice is self-evaluated in that the reflective and analytical insights of the researcher-practitioners themselves form the basis of the developmental process. Action research is participative in that those involved contribute equally to the inquiry, and collaborative in that the researcher is not an expert doing research from an external perspective, but a partner working with and for those affected by the problem.