

Action Research?

Anyone can!



Your guide to action research



What is action research?

Have you tried a new strategy in your classroom lately? Have you planned your lessons differently? Are you looking for an alternative approach to dealing with a problem in your classroom? If your answer to any of these questions is **Yes**, you're already on the way to doing action research. By formalising the process through careful planning, acting and evaluating, and by doing effective research, you can elevate simple changes to the level of worthwhile and effective action research.

Action research is a systematic process that allows you to try out different ways of doing things in your classroom or in your school, until you find something that really works for you and for your students.

Why should I do action research?

As a teacher, you have probably come across curriculum material or reports that have been developed by a central education department that just don't work well in your particular school or in your own classroom. Research may have been done in compiling the material, but the final product is standardised and too broad to be of use in your particular situation. Or perhaps you've undertaken some professional development and picked up some tips, only to find that they didn't work for you or your students. Here's how action research can help:

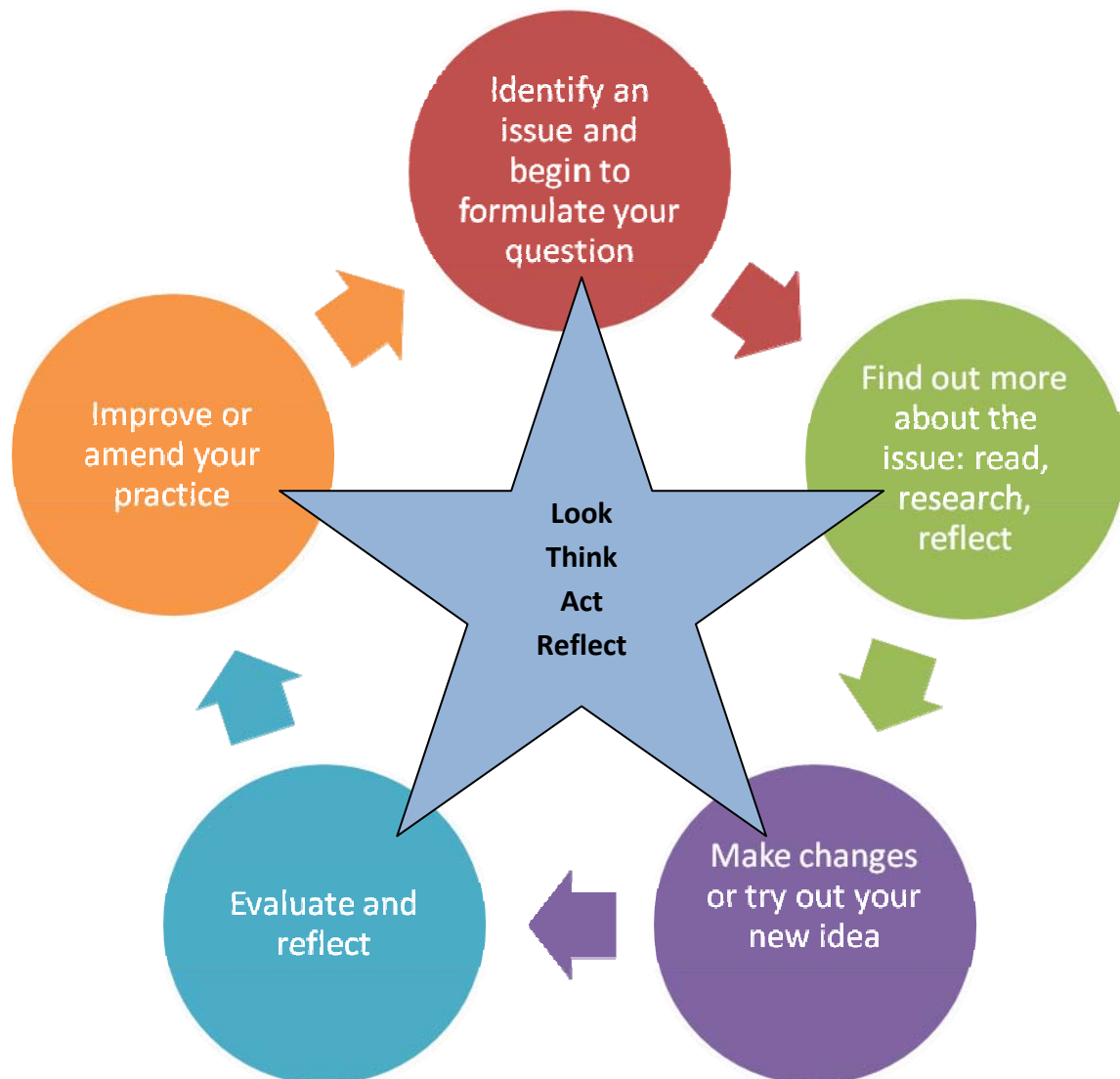
- Action research is **situation specific**: it enables you to examine your own situation.
- It is a **participatory process** and allows for input from all those involved.
- It is **collaborative**. You work with colleagues and other participants to answer your research question.
- It allows for an **ongoing process of self-evaluation** where you appraise yourself and your own performance.
- It assumes that you already have a great deal of professional knowledge and can continue to develop this knowledge and improve your practice.

Where will I find the time?

Teaching is hard work. Meeting curriculum requirements, keeping up with changes in technology in classrooms, teaching and preparing new and exciting lessons, marking, talking to parents, coaching sport and supervising extra-mural activities – the list is a long one. Increasingly, teachers are also expected to absorb more of the parental and counselling role in their boys' lives.

Action research isn't just something to add to your load. It may take a little time to organise and evaluate, but by allowing you to take control and make changes that enable best practice, the benefits far outweigh the costs.

How does action research work?



Step One: Identify an issue and begin to formulate your question

Choose something that is important to you as a teacher: for example, look at some of your own teaching methods or at the way your boys learn. Start with a simple, manageable project - you may not be able to change everything at once, but you can improve a small part.

Start off with a question, like *Why do the boys in my class...?* Think about how you could develop that question into something which includes an intervention, like *What happens when I ...?*

Step Two: Find out more about the issue: read, research, reflect!

Do research to find out about your topic. Read books, journals and other research studies and papers. When you start, try to use at least three sources. You'll find more and more references as you go along. Remember to keep reading: your research is not confined to one part of the study – it's an integral and ongoing part of it.

Maintain focus while you research so your project doesn't become unmanageable. You may find that you need to revisit your question and make changes, or even change your direction to work on something more interesting.

Step Three: Make changes or try out your new idea

What are you going to do? Make the change or try out your new idea in your classroom. How will you measure your results? You can use a wide variety of data collection methods: interviews, questionnaires, observation, journals and many more.

Your research must be systematic and rigorous to give your work credibility. You need to provide sound evidence that you aren't just making it all up! Check that what you are doing is really working and that your project stays focussed.

Step Four: Evaluate and reflect

Look at the information you've collected and analyse it. How can you be sure that your conclusions are fair and accurate? Involve a critical friend – someone whose opinion you really value. He or she can help you look at your work differently. Consult colleagues or your validation group to help you check your data and make judgements about your report.

Step Five: Improve or amend your practice

How will you do things differently? What have you learned from the project? Remember that action research is empowering – it allows *you* to change the way you teach. You can continue to make changes all the time, and continue to grow as a professional.

Have your questions been answered? Perhaps other issues have emerged that you need to examine? Were the results what you expected? How will you share your results? Could they be useful to others in your school/community/the world? Present your findings to others – you can give a talk, do a presentation at a conference, publish a paper or participate in on-line teacher forums.

Remember: The result is not about "I've done that or I made that happen". Jean McNiff (2002) sums up the process like this:

**I can show that certain changes took place as I changed my practice,
particularly in myself, and different relationships evolved.**

How to set out a research proposal

Action research project title:

Research question:

- sub-questions

Research rationale/background:

- What is the identified need that this project will address?

Key readings:

- Readings that have informed the research proposal; at this stage it need not be a full-blown literature review.

Research methodology:

- research approach (qualitative, quantitative, mixed method)
- sample
- data collection methods
- data analysis methods
- validity and reliability checks (i.e. how will you ensure that your data is valid and reliable?)

Reporting:

- If you intend to publish your findings, a report of 3000 - 5000 words (excluding Reference List) is appropriate.

Key project activities with timeline:

- This is a 'to do' list with timeline, e.g. send out permission letters; have initial meeting with participants to outline project, etc.

Ethical considerations:

- time involved for participants
- anonymity considerations (surveys, reporting, etc)
- permissions (to participate, interview, take photos, video)
- consideration of any disadvantage associated with the research

Budget:

- Costs involved (travel, stationery, help with data collection)

How to publish your action research report

The following is a suggestion for your report format.

Introduction

Include here:

- An overview of your research (your research topic, your rationale for undertaking research in this area and a brief discussion of any relevant literature on your topic). You may, if you wish, include the literature review as a separate section.
- Your research question and any sub-questions
- The research context (a brief description of your school - ethos and character)
- The research sample

Research plan

Include here:

- a description of your 'action'
- your approach (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method)
- data collection techniques
- methods of analysis

Results: Analysis and discussion

- your key findings
- discussion of your findings in terms of the research question

Conclusion

- A summary of your findings in terms of the research question

Implications for practice

- Reflect on how your findings will contribute to a change in practice for you, your colleagues and your school.
- Consider how your findings will influence the next cycle of action research.

How do I find out more?

Readings in action research

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