

Stewardship Circle: Action Research Guidance

Contents

Enquiry question.....	1
What is action research?.....	1
Key features and principles of action research.....	2
Steps in action research.....	2
Methods and data sources.....	3
Ethical Considerations.....	4
Getting started with you action research.....	5
References.....	6
Further Resources.....	6
Action Research Websites.....	7

Enquiry Question

As part of the Stewardship Circle, you are invited to identify an enquiry question. This should be something related to citizen led action that you want to understand more about. This is essentially a simple action research project. The group can help you frame your question, and you may decide to team up with somebody else in the group to explore a question more deeply. It's up to you to decide how you present and share your findings with the other participants.

If you haven't undertaken any research before this paper aims to offer you some basic guidance.

What is Action research?

As its name implies, action research is intended to achieve both action and research. Both change and understanding are usually desirable from a piece of action research. Action research allows you to develop knowledge or understanding as part of practice and to improve your understanding of your practice (Dick, 2011).

Key Features and Principles of Action Research

Some key features and principles of action research are that:

- It begins with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organisation.
- It allows research to be done in situations where other research methods may be difficult to use.
- It tends to be qualitative and participative.
- It is useful when you wish to involve the people in the community being researched
- It is useful when you wish to bring about change at the same time
- It is typically a cyclical process. The later cycles are used to challenge and refine the results of the earlier cycles.
- It involves the process of actively participating in a change situation whilst conducting research.
- It involves researchers working with others to propose a new course of action to help their community improve its work practices
- It is critically reflective as it involves the researchers regularly and systematically critiquing what they are doing. They refine the questions they are asking and the methods they are using and the understanding and subsequent action plans they are developing.
- It is collaborative - though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members.

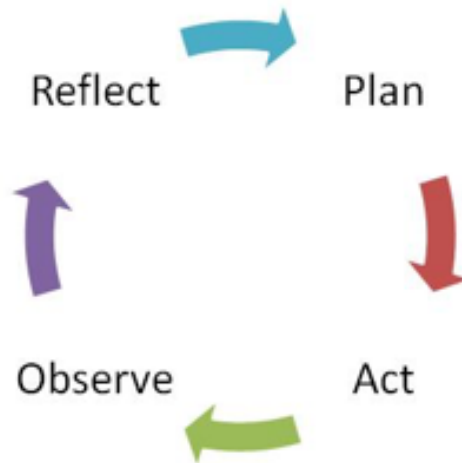
(Adapted from: Winter. 1989; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988)

Steps in Action Research

The basic steps of an action research process as defined by McNiff (2002) are:

1. We review our current practice,
2. identify an aspect that we want to investigate,
3. imagine a way forward,
4. try it out, and
5. take stock of what happens.
6. We modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right)
7. monitor what we do,
8. review and evaluate the modified action,
9. and so on ...

(McNiff, 2002, McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996)



Stringer (1999) identifies three basic phases *of the action research process*:

1. **Look** - building a picture and gathering information. This involves defining and describing the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set. We also describe what all the participants (connectors, community members, etc.) have been doing.
2. **Think** – interpreting and explaining. This involves analysing and interpreting the situation. We reflect on what participants have been doing. We look at areas of success and any issues or problems.
3. **Act** – resolving issues and problems. This involves judging the worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities. We act to formulate solutions to any problems. (Stringer 1999: 18; 43-44;160)

Methods and data sources

Action Research tends to be a holistic approach to problem-solving, rather than one single method for collecting data. Therefore, different research tools may be used to collect data. (O'Brien, 2001). Methods design and data collection tend to be participatory with community members often collecting data themselves (Quinn Patton, 2002). Participatory approaches include the sort of methods often used in qualitative research including:

- keeping a research /learning journal
- document collection and analysis
- participant observation
- questionnaire / surveys
- structured and unstructured interviews
- case studies

Other sources of data for action research might include:

- your personal reflection, learning and analyses of your community building practice
- feedback from community members
- conversations with community builders and connectors
- observations of community builders / connectors
- online journals and documents on ABCD
- Peers / colleagues
- Community development literature

Ethical Considerations

Because action research is carried out in real-world circumstances, and involves close and open communication among the people involved, it's important to pay close attention to ethical issues such as those outlined in Box 1:

Box 1: Ensuring Ethical Practice in Action Research

“Make sure that the relevant persons, committees and authorities have been consulted, and that the principles guiding the work are accepted in advance by all.

All participants must be allowed to influence the work, and the wishes of those who do not wish to participate must be respected.

The development of the work must remain visible and open to suggestions from others.

Permission must be obtained before making observations or examining documents produced for other purposes.

Descriptions of others' work and points of view must be negotiated with those concerned before being published.

The researcher must accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality.” (O'Brien 2001, Winter 1996)

Getting Started with your Action Research

In identifying the focus of your action research, consider the following questions:

- What aspects of your community building practice are on your mind at the moment?
- What aspects of your work would you like to try and change and why?
- What issues or concerns can you actually do something about? Be realistic- can you influence the situation, or is it outside of your scope? (If it really is outside your scope, perhaps choose an smaller aspect of the issue)

(McNiff, 2002)

Planning for your action research project involves asking (and answering!) a number of key questions.

1. What issue am I interested in researching?
2. Why do I want to research this issue?
3. What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?
4. What can I do? What will I do?
5. What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?
6. How can I explain that influence?
7. How can I ensure that any judgments I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
8. How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

(McNiff 2002) Bear these questions in mind as you plan and prepare for your action research project.

References

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Further Resources

- May, C., Brown, G., Cooper, N. and Brill, L. (2009) *The Sustainable Livelihoods handbook: An asset based approach to Poverty*. Church Action on Poverty / Oxfam.
- Smith, M. K. (1996; 2001, 2007) 'Action research', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm.
- Coghlan, D. and Brannick, D. (2009) *Doing Action Research in your own Organization*, London: Sage. 128 pages. 3rd Edition. Popular introduction. Part one covers the basics of action research Part two looks at the implementation of the action research project .
- Johnson, A. P. (2007) *A short guide to action research 3e*. Allyn and Bacon. Popular step by step guide for master's work.

- Carson, T. R. and Sumara, D. J. (ed.) (1997) *Action Research as a Living Practice*, New York: Peter Lang. 140 pages. Book draws on a wide range of sources to develop an understanding of action research. Explores action research as a lived practice, 'that asks the researcher to not only investigate the subject at hand but, as well, to provide some account of the way in which the investigation both shapes and is shaped by the investigator.
- Quigley, B. A. and Kuhne, G. W. (eds.) (1997) *Creating Practical Knowledge Through Action Research*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass. Guide to action research that outlines the action research process, provides a project planner, and presents examples to show how action research can yield improvements in six different settings, including a hospital, a university and a literacy education program.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (ed.) (1996) *New Directions in Action Research*, London; Falmer Press. 266 + xii pages. Useful collection that explores principles and procedures for critical action research; problems and suggested solutions; and postmodernism and critical action research.

Action research web sites

- Action Learning and Action Resources (ALAR). It lists frequently asked questions about action research.
<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq.html>
- Action Research at Bath University (UK)
<http://www.actionresearch.net/>
- Peter Reason's webpages on Action Research.
<http://people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/>
- 'Action research', *the encyclopedia of informal education*,
<http://www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm>