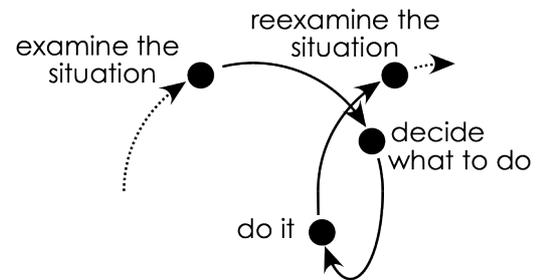


Action research — a thumbnail sketch

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How do *you* solve problems that are important, novel and tricky? I suspect that first you look more or less closely at the problem, to increase your understanding. Then you work out some strategy, which you put into action. You observe what the results are and learn from them. If necessary you fine tune your strategy, or perhaps try something different. In short:

- you examine the situation
- you decide what to do
- you do it
- you reexamine the situation ...

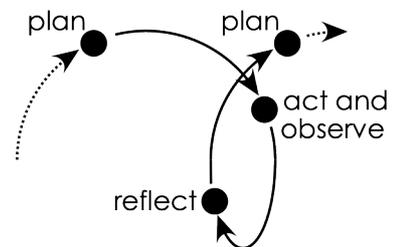


At least some of the time most of us use this approach — because it works. It allows us to deal with issues we haven't encountered before. We can continue with trial and error. As our understanding of the situation improves, so do our actions.

Active and reflective

This approach combines action and understanding. As we learn more about the world we become more effective in acting on that world.

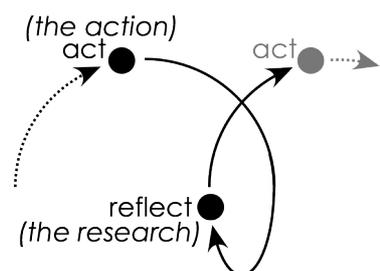
That's how action research works too. It, too, is a spiral that cycles between observation, planning and action. However, action research tries to make the understanding more explicit. It does this by using *critical* reflection to enhance the understanding. As Kemmis and McTaggart (1998) describe it: plan → act and observe → reflect.



In action research, unlike our everyday behaviour, we reflect regularly, and systematically, and critically. Our understanding is then more detailed. We are also more aware, consciously, of what we learn.

The planning phase helps to make the later action and observation more effective. This is because in our plans we decide (provisionally and tentatively) what we are going to do. We also decide what results we expect. We are then more likely to notice when we don't achieve the desired results.

This cycle may be described even more simply as action alternating with critical reflection: action → reflection. The reflection phase includes both review and planning. It is the source of the theory (and understanding or learning) that emerges from the research.



In other words, action research is true to label. It is action and research. The action and the research are integrated

within each turn of the action research spiral. In some forms of action research the research yields theory. On other occasions it leads to understanding on the part of those involved.

The process as so far described works well — if you are solving your own problem and don't depend on or affect anyone else. There is another important respect in which most action research differs from much everyday behaviour. It is carefully and thoroughly participative and egalitarian. It involves those other people who can influence outcomes or have information to contribute.

Participative

In some action research studies there are many people who have an interest in what is being done. Most action research seeks to involve as many of them as possible in the research. It also seeks to involve them as much as possible. Above all it seeks to treat them as equal partners.

The ideal is to involve everybody who can affect, or can be affected by, the likely actions and outcomes. This may be easily done when there are few such people. Those people then plan and carry out and evaluate the action research. If numbers are few, everyone can be given the chance to be involved.

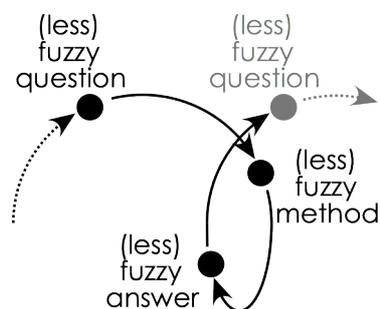
Acting collectively they examine the situation and plan what is to be done. They specify the results they want. They agree who will do it. They meet after the action to reflect carefully on what was done, and if it worked. If so, they decide the next step. If it didn't work out as expected they decide what to do differently when they repeat the step they have just taken. They try to take everyone's ideas into account.

Sometimes there are too many people for this to be feasible. You may then set up a representative group that is small enough to work well together. They do the planning, action and observation, and critical reflection on behalf of those not present. It is then highly desirable that those who weren't present are told about the plans and the reasons for them, and are invited to comment *and influence the actions*.

Cyclic

It is evident from the description so far that action research is cyclic. The cycles serve many purposes, two in particular:

- action and theory are integrated within each cycle — the action informs the theory, which informs the action
- the theory and the research method can be refined with each cycle — you don't have to know everything at the beginning.



You can begin with a very fuzzy idea of the situation, and learn as you go. To further increase flexibility you can use cycles within cycles within cycles ... Some cycles may be very brief. Others may cover an entire study. Others are intermediate.

Qualitative

As mentioned, most action research is done with the participants as equal partners. Much of the understanding arises during the critical reflection, which often consists of discussion between those taking part. As language is the medium of discussion, most action research is qualitative.

This is less a limitation than it might seem — quantitative studies can also be included to provide numerical data if it is useful to do so. Sometimes you can think of action research as an umbrella research approach — a meta-methodology — with other approaches able to shelter beneath it.

Critical

Action research can be critical in two senses:

- It can challenge the status quo. All participants are ideally involved as equals. Action research can therefore challenge conventional views about power, status and authority
- It can challenge the emerging understanding or theory. The best action research vigorously seeks out information that doesn't fit with present understanding. Good action researchers continuously search out *disconfirming* evidence.

Rigorous

Action research differs from most quantitative research. Because of its flexibility and its use of participation it can't use the same sources of rigour as some other research does. Fortunately it has its own methods for ensuring its rigour. In particular:

- As mentioned, there is a vigorous search for disconfirming evidence. Initial understanding can be refined greatly as the research proceeds
- Similarly, resolving differences of opinion amongst participants can provide a path to deeper and mutual understanding
- Within each cycle, as plans are developed they are tested by being acted on
- Each cycle is a chance to further develop and refine theory and understanding.

Varied

In all versions of action research there are twin goals of action and understanding (that is, learning) or theory. Sometimes, though, the research component mostly takes the form of an implicit understanding on the part of those involved. The action is primary. You could think of this as "*action* research". In other forms of action research (for instance, theses and dissertations) the research is the main emphasis. The action is almost a fringe benefit. This could be called "*action research*".

Apart from this distinction between action oriented and research oriented approaches, action research has many other sub-varieties. Here are just a few:

- the critical action research approach of Carr and Kemmis (1986) with its emphasis on the "emancipation" of participants

- soft systems methodology (Checkland, 1981), a systems-based analysis especially of information systems
- appreciative inquiry (Srivastva and Cooperrider, 1999), an approach which identifies and builds on the strengths of an organisation or community
- participatory action research, with strong participation often by the disadvantaged (for example Selener, 1998 — there are also many others who use this label)
- action learning (Revans, 1982), in which small groups of participants, perhaps facilitated, work on collective or individual projects and learn from them
- action science (Argyris, 2004), focussing on honest communication and learning that challenges existing values
- and for its clarity, I recommend Yoland Wadsworth's best-selling description of "do it yourself social research", a form of participative action research.

Michael Quinn Patton's 2011 book on "developmental evaluation" is action research in all but name. There are many others. The recent revision of the *Sage handbook of action research* by Bradbury (2015) gives some idea of the variety. There is a recently-published two-volume *Encyclopedia of action research* (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014) with over 300 entries on aspects of action research and related topics.

In summary

Action research is research for those who wish to work collaboratively to combine theory building (or at least learning and the development of understanding) with action. It is true to label in that it pursues both action (or change) and research (or understanding). It works well in the field. It can be useful to researchers, practitioners, and anyone else wishing to bring about improvement.

Action research is flexible. It can therefore be expected to vary considerably from situation to situation, from study to study. Effectiveness and rigour, however, do demand certain qualities. I expect the end result to be influenced strongly by the research situation and the evidence. I expect a critical stance on the part of those involved. Above all, I think a vigorous and continuous pursuit of disconfirming evidence is an important feature.

To my mind the major justification for action research methods is that they can be participative, flexible, and responsive to the situation. I know of no other research approaches that do this as well, at least in the short term. On these grounds I think it will usually, though perhaps not always, be cyclic in nature. I have a strong preference for it to be strongly participative and egalitarian. It is usually qualitative.

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