



EBL 101

Research Methods: Action Research

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Action research, also known as participatory action research, is a type of enquiry that emerged from the field of Education and is primarily used by teachers. Various other disciplines also use action research, such as public health and nursing (Hannigan, 2008). However, any practitioner in a social practice who conducts research could find action research a useful tool. Action research is undertaken at the local level and often involves the participation of those who might otherwise be considered subjects of the research. It's a practical type of research designed to inform local issues of a practical nature. So, the teachers are looking at questions from their classrooms and librarians as researchers are looking at issues arising from their library. Action research's focal point is a problem to be solved and it is undertaken by practitioners.

A definition of action research: "Action research is the study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding" (Munn-Giddings & Winter, 2002, p. 8). The notion of "social situation" here is a broad one, and while it may suggest mingling at a cocktail party, it should be taken to mean that any social interaction that a practitioner or a practitioner's organization has with people (users, clients, students, patients, etc.) is a candidate for action research.

Action research is a process that helps practitioners develop a better understanding about the particulars of a specific practice-based situation. It has a personal and a social aim: there is ideally improvement in the practitioner's learning and an improvement in the situation that is being investigated. These

two aims are interdependent. (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 2003).

In terms of the steps one takes for an action research project, there are a variety of ways in which the process is described. Some say there are three steps although each of those steps has several sub-steps. Sometimes the steps are referred to as phases with a variety of numbers there. I'm going to list five basic steps in action research with the caveat that this process is an iterative, cyclical, and reflexive process rather than a linear one.

Action Research Steps

1. Identify – Problem, Question, Baseline Data, and Professional Development
2. Plan – The Intervention, Assessment, and Time to Assess
3. Collect Data
4. Analyze Data
5. Reflect – What was learned, What will be improved, and Making improvements (Teachers' PD INC, 2012-13)

Critics of action research are bothered by the notion that the process involves the local level and input from stakeholders, claiming that these are case studies, or the "how I done it good in my library" study, and are most likely not generalizable to other situations or institutions (Beck & Manuel, 2008, p. 196). Beck and Manuel (2008) state that "while not claiming that its results are completely representative or generalizable, action research does include a number of methodological steps to ensure that it is rigorous in obtaining its results, and these steps help to ensure that results are at least somewhat representative or generalizable" (p. 196). As with any other methodology, care should be taken to ensure that it is the best methodology to deal with a particular research question.

Action research has emerged in the library literature around the topic of information literacy and elsewhere. Here are some examples.

Greenan, E. (2002). Walking the talk: A collaborative collection development project. *School Libraries in Canada*, 21(4), 12-14.

Kendall, M. (2005). Tackling student referencing errors through an online tutorial. *Aslib Proceedings*, 57(2), 131-145.

Rious, K. (2013). Teaching social justice in an information literacy course: An action research case study. *Catholic Library World*, 83(3), 191-195.

Vezzosi, M. (2006). Information literacy and action research: An overview and some reflections. *New Library World*, 107(7-8), 286-301.

Wilson, T.D. (2000). Recent trends in user studies: action research and qualitative methods. *Information Research* 5(3). Retrieved 31 Oct. 2013 from <http://informationr.net/ir/5-3/paper76.html>

There are lots of books and articles available that describe the process of action research from various perspectives and in varying levels of detail. Here are some examples:

Chevalier, J.M. & Buckles, D.J. (2013). *Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. New York : Routledge.

Cook, D. & Farmer, L. (Eds.). (2011). *Using qualitative methods in action research: How librarians can get to the why of data*. Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries.

Howard, J.K. & Eckhardt, S.A. (2005). *Action research: A guide for library media specialists*. Worthington, OH: Linworth.

McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2011). *All you need to know about action research* (2nd ed). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Mills, G.E. (2014). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher* (5th ed). Boston : Pearson.

Pavlish, C.P. & Pharris, M.D. (2012). *Community-based collaborative action research: A nursing approach*. Sudbury, MA : Jones & Bartlett Learning.

For a research topic with very practical, practice-based origins, action research may be the best way to explore it and obtain useful, reflective answers.

References

Beck, S.E. & Muel, K. (2008) *Practical research methods for librarians and information professionals*. New York: Neal-Schuman.

Hannigan, G.G. (2008). Action research: Methods that make sense. *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 16(1), 53-58. doi: 10.1300/J115v16n01_06

McNiff, J., Lomax, P., & Whitehead, J. (2003). *You and Your Action Research Project*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved 31 Oct. 2013 from <<http://www.myilibrary.com?ID=3669>>

Winter, R. & Munn-Giddings, C. (2002). *A Handbook for Action Research in Health and Social Care*. Routledge. Retrieved 31 Oct. 2013 from <<http://www.myilibrary.com?ID=6016>>

Teachers' PD INC. (2012-13). Action research model. Retrieved 31 Oct. 2013 from http://www.csuchico.edu/teachergrants/actionresearch/ar_model.shtml