

# What Is Action Research?

PART

1

*Action research offers a greatly needed forum at a time of growing recognition around the world that engagements between researchers and practitioners are central to generating both new knowledge and innovations.*

—L. David Brown

## What Is This Book About?

The world of research can seem complicated, especially when you first start learning about it. There is no shortage of books one can read and classes one can take about research, but somehow, they miss the mark in many ways. There should be some way to learn the fundamentals, in simple terms, as you enter into that world of research. This book is about those fundamentals. It is not an “idiot’s” or “dummy’s” guide to action research. It simply organizes and delivers the 100 most relevant questions and answers to help you get the lay of the land. The jargon, concepts, and facts to have a good understanding of what matters in action research are distilled into digestible language.

Action research is not like traditional research, it is younger, more dynamic, and more relevant to us in our daily practice. Action research encompasses a philosophy of work and learning, while also providing us with critical know-how to better our lives and our work, and also better the lives of those we work with and for.

There are 10 parts in this book. Each one can stand alone, but we hope you move through them sequentially to get a better idea of the big picture. Parts 1 and 2 lay the groundwork and address questions about what it means to be an action researcher. Part 3 provides concrete examples of action research in the field. Parts 4 through 7 cover the nuts and bolts of doing action research. Part 8 covers details about sharing and communicating results, and Parts 9 and 10 take you beyond practice and out into the action research world.

In this book, you are going to learn how action research can help you change your life and career for the better. It is a way of thinking about measuring, quantifying, adjusting, and thinking about decisions that really matter. We aren’t interested in reading volumes about research methods; we are interested in getting things done, and getting them done efficiently, systematically, and with purpose. Ultimately, the choice to make change—to act—is ours.

**More questions? See question 100.**

## What Is Action Research, and Where Did It Come From?

Simply put, action research is a method of systematically examining behavior in an effort to improve practice. The *action* refers to doing something. The *research* refers to thinking critically and logically about a problem. Together, they form a powerful combination for making productive change in the workplace.

*Action research* was originally coined by Kurt Lewin in the late 1940s and has evolved into an umbrella term for any systematic approach bridging research and practice by empowering practitioners with decision-making authority. Basically, action research allows those who live the issue to be the main participant in systematically solving the issue. Action research creates an ability to delve into complex issues in any given situation through formal investigation.

This idea is not new. It was primarily used early on by social scientists in the United States who explored issues in business and communities (i.e., wage disparity, sociocultural discrimination). Noted American educators such as Hilda Taba and John Dewey early in the 20th century used action research principles as tools for teachers to link what they were seeing and doing in their classrooms to what more controlled research was reporting, but in a more applicable and meaningful way. And while action research fell out of favor in the United States with ivory tower positivists who believed that only experts conducted valuable research to answer universal “truths,” teachers in Great Britain continued to use action research well into the 1960s. And so, while its roots lay in a strong qualitative tradition, action research has changed and grown over time to be more aptly called a mixed-method approach, borrowing from both qualitative and quantitative traditions.

In the 1970s, arguably as an extension of Paulo Freire’s anti-colonial view of education, this “new” theoretical approach, combined with the narrowing rift between seemingly conflicting qualitative and quantitative research traditions in education, provided necessary pushback to positivist researchers. In its current iteration, considering the fact that practitioners are critical pieces in reform, action research is looked upon as a piece of workplace development and individual professional development.

Other popular names for action research are *participatory action research*, *practical inquiry*, *teacher research*, *practitioner research*, *reflective inquiry*, *inquiry-oriented teaching*, or other similarly phrased compound words including synonyms for research and practice. And while the actual label may be confusing, at the heart of the matter is the fact that we are all naturally researchers, perhaps without knowing it. We often try out new strategies and make changes and modifications based on “how it worked” in our daily lives. Action research formalizes this intuition.

**More questions? See questions 4, 7, and 21.**

## QUESTION

## 3

## What Are the Key Features of Action Research I Should Remember?

There are many kinds of research, each coming from slightly different perspectives. Some of these differences arise because research spans all fields, and some just because of internal differences of opinion. The core for most of these research perspectives is, for the most part, the same. For example, in both traditional and action research, developing a high-quality research question is important. The difference lies in how and why the question is shaped. Also, many of the approaches used in action research look similar to program evaluation research, but subtle differences arise, like the subject of focus and scope. In program evaluation, the subject of interest is a multifaceted entity: Many research questions are posed, and research is typically conducted by an outsider(s). In action research, one or a few questions are posed about a relatively small sample of participants by someone who is deeply involved with the research. Although there are differences in research traditions, there are key features of action research that make it unique.

Action Research	Traditional Research
Focuses on a single setting	Focuses on larger scales
Uses the sample of interest, the people you work with or know	Seeks to randomly select participants
Is more informal and dynamic	Seeks to use rigorous methodology over long-term studies
Tends to rely on easy-to-access descriptive measures	Demands sophisticated statistical analysis
Looks to inform practice	Looks to inform theory
Requires less formal training	Requires an advanced degree or specialized training

Even if these key features don't make sense or mean a lot to you now, rest assured when you have finished this book, they will make perfect sense.

**More questions? See questions 4, 9, and 10.**

QUESTION

# 4

## How Is Action Research Like and Unlike Other Research?

In formal or traditional research, no matter the field, a driving concern is generalizability. This means that results from a study, let's say with a small group of people, apply to a larger group of people. For example, if you wanted to know if a medical procedure designed to alleviate symptoms of Alzheimer's worked well, you would not need to try it on *everyone* with Alzheimer's. Instead, you would test the innovation on a few and generalize to the larger population. If it works with a group of 50 people, then maybe it will work with 5 million people. Again, this is an objective of traditional, or positivist, research. From a small *sample* of people, data are generalized to a larger *population* of people. With traditional research, you would need to worry about complex issues related to the size and makeup of the group and whether they can represent the population.

With action research, you are not usually interested in a larger population. In a small business, you might be interested in how your local customers respond to a new product. This is the defining difference with action research—generalizability can be important, but not a priority. You are working under the assumption that your group, whether patients, customers, or students, remains similar from year to year. And so, what you find out this year will likely be the same as next year, and the year after that. The defining characteristic of action research is that *you* are the researcher, and *you* are interested in doing something to benefit *your* context. It is personal. Action research puts the *you* in research.

**More questions? See questions 2, 21, and 37.**

## How Do You Choose Your Action Research Style?

Technical action research, practical action research, and critical action research are three different and generally agreed-upon types of action research. *How do you choose?* Answering questions about your project will dictate the type, or style, of action research you use. For example, does the action research project intend to examine the effectiveness of a “new” or “adaptive” practice? Or does the action research project intend to change the existing working workplace culture? Answers to these may seem rudimentary, but they are critical to choosing the appropriate style of action research.

- **Technical action research** asks you to apply an existing practice from somewhere else and test its effectiveness in your setting. Technical action research is probably the most widely used, as it addresses some current issue for which there is an offered solution. Technical action research also more closely follows traditional research design protocols (e.g., group comparison designs) and attends to internal validity more than other types (i.e., control for extraneous variables). For example, perhaps a plant manager notices inefficiency or a preponderance of errors in the accounting department. He or she then goes to a trade show and sees a new piece of accounting software espoused to cut time and increase productivity. The technical action research project would compare the outcome variables across time to judge the software developers’ claims. Technical action research is typically an either/or proposition. In the example, the software works or it doesn’t.
- **Practical action research** differs from technical action research in that you *design* the changes, not merely adopt an existing practice.
- **Critical action research** changes the game in that you want to change existing structures and actively engage in changing the “system,” by working with or against other participants in the same context.

All three styles can be used in combination. Typically, action research projects start on the technical side, as it addresses an immediate observed issue. However, because all contexts are individual, existing programs don't necessarily generalize. There are many different participants and structures that require some sort of adaptation.

**More questions? See questions 37, 38, 39, and 40.**

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## QUESTION

## 6

## Why Should I Bother With Action Research?

**B**ecause it's important, and here's why. Todd was a public high school social studies teacher in San Francisco, California. It was a challenging school with high student mobility, consistent staff turnover, extremely limited access to resources, a district policy that forced students to go away from their neighborhood school without providing transportation, and oh by the way, statewide test scores were extraordinarily low when compared to other public schools in the city. Todd figured the best way to address these issues was to roll up his sleeves and get to work giving the best education he could to those he served. Of course, you say. That's what good teachers do. But how do you address these issues? What can you teach that will get kids interested enough to come and stay in school, while raising test scores and not driving you crazy enough to quit in the middle of the year? Sounds daunting, but it's really not, and action research can help. Fortunately, Todd hung out with a couple of lawyers that were looking for volunteer hours as part of their job. Todd mentioned that the district had a mock trial competition every year, and that would be a nice symbiotic relationship. The lawyers got their volunteer hours, and Todd got the badly needed help. In their first year, students from this high school won the district mock trial championship and traveled to the state championship. It is a good story, but was it really effective? Did it improve the concerning issues of the school?

Here's where action research came in. Todd noticed an increase in attendance, engagement, and classroom test scores. Coincidence? Not after 4 years of similar outcome patterns. The mock trial built community, increased academic interest, and gave everyone a vested voice. And, yes, statewide test scores increased for those student participants; a nice byproduct. That is the real improvement any teacher worth her or his salt wants: community, engagement, and voice for improvement. Whatever position you hold, or wherever you work, think about something you really want to change, ask a good question, document it, and act.

**More questions? See questions 2, 77, and 88.**

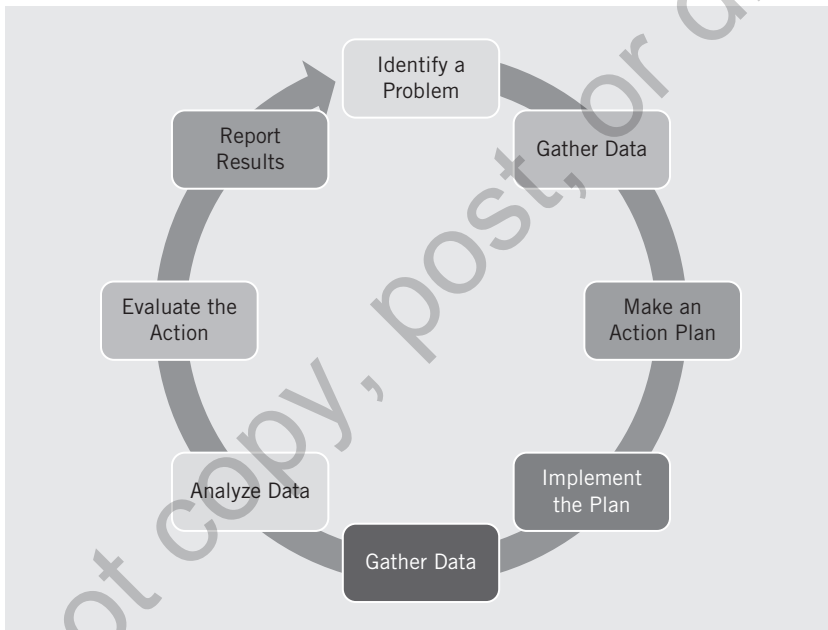
## QUESTION

## 7

## How Is Action Research Cyclical?

It begins, and it never ends. This is true with action research, and with learning in general. Think about it. When you get smarter about something, you are naturally led to new questions, new curiosities, and then more answers. Let us illustrate what an Action Research Cycle (ARC) looks like.

Figure 1.1



The ARC begins as you identify a problem and shape it into a question or hypothesis statement. Most often, it is a question of whether or not some innovation works, and upon what it might depend. For example, perhaps you notice a problem at work. In this identification stage the action researcher would probably seek advice from others, or perhaps Google the problem to see what others are doing about it. Identifying the problem, and thus your research question and hypothesis, is the first stage in the ARC.

Most often, the next step is to gather data. In some cases, your question will already be based on sound data, and gathering more is unnecessary. In schools, many teachers will use student outcome data, like quizzes, tests, or grades. Some might choose observable behaviors like attendance, referrals, and so on. Still others may choose to create a survey or questionnaire to gather data. Health care workers will use patient well-being inventories. Entrepreneurs will likely be concerned with employee and customer satisfaction and, ultimately, profit. The question identified often dictates the kind of data you will use. For example, perhaps a teacher recognizes students are not doing their homework. Then the question identified might be

*Will checking homework as students enter class improve the homework completion rate?*

For this example, the data collected are determined by the research question. The need now is to determine how often students do their homework. The action plan is a written procedure of what, when, and how you will do something. This is an important step because it forces you to think through contingencies before you implement a plan. In this step, you operationalize your thinking and make it concrete.

When you implement the plan, you are taking note of anything out of the ordinary that happens that might unduly influence the result.

Either during or after the *action*, you will again gather data. In the homework example, you were gathering data throughout the action. In other situations, you may find yourself having to collect data after some intervention or change.

Now that you have your data, you will need to analyze them. This is where you turn data into usable information. Data alone do not help decision making. Did it work for everyone? Are there some groups it did not work for? As you compile the information and reflect on the results you are naturally led to deeper questions. You are led back to the beginning to reshape your thoughts now that you've learned something.

While not an absolutely necessary component of the cycle, we recommend action researchers also take the time to report results. This might be as simple as sharing with a colleague or as ambitious as publishing the research in a professional journal.

**More questions? See 6 and 8.**

## QUESTION

## 8

## How Much Time Does an Action Research Project Really Take?

You will read this phrase throughout this book: *It depends*. The duration of an action research project really does depend on many different elements, like your question, skill set, participant availability, and so on. All of these are covered in more detail in this book. For example, imagine that you are a teacher and want to know if there is a difference between females and males in your class on statewide test scores for math. All you would need to do is to pull your students' scores from the state database and then analyze the data. Similarly, if you are a social worker you might want to add a question or two to your mental health intake paperwork and then look at the responses. Both are pretty quick projects, maybe 3 hours each. Not too bad, but what does it really get you? Not much, except those answers could be an entrée to forming more complex questions.

To continue with the examples, let's say males outscore females on these tests, or that mental health clients are suspicious of giving out their personal information. As a teacher or mental health professional, you want to change these circumstances. For either discipline, the process is the same. You would search the literature for effective interventions (~4 hours), implement changes during a specified time frame (~10 hours total), collect and structure data (~5 hours), analyze data (~4 hours), and report out your findings (~2 hours). In sum, about 25 hours. Seems like a lot, so you are probably saying that there is no way you can do that in the normal scope of your work. You would be right, and we wouldn't recommend that. However, throughout this book, we discuss ways to integrate action research into your daily routine, not add to it. Further, when you become facile in integrating action research into your daily work life, you will find that you become a more inquisitive and effective practitioner with what we call an *action research disposition*. This disposition is an approach to asking and answering questions of the world, and it lasts a lifetime.

**More questions? See questions 5, 6, and 7.**