

Jean McNiff

Action Research

All You Need to Know



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SAGE Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
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2455 Teller Road
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SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

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Production editor: Victoria Nicholas
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PART I

What do I need to know?

This part is about the main contemporary issues in action research. It explains that action research is about practitioners creating new ideas about improving their work and putting those ideas forward as their personal theories of practice. This is different from traditionalist research in which official researchers produce theory, which they then expect practitioners to apply to their practices. Given the power-constituted nature of these issues, we are therefore immediately into issues of power and politics, about what counts as knowledge and who counts as a knower.

Part I discusses these ideas. It contains the following chapters.

Chapter 1 What is action research?

Chapter 2 Who can do action research?

Chapter 3 The values base of action research

Chapter 4 Critical times for action research

I suggested in the Introduction that you could regard working with the book as your action enquiry into how you can learn about action research and how to do it. At this point in your action–reflection cycle you are asking, ‘What is my concern?’ You are saying that you need to find out what the main ideas of action research are so that you have a good grasp of the basics in order to begin your action research from an informed position.



1

What is action research?

The action research family is wide and diverse, and different people hold different perspectives about what action research is, what it is for, who can do it and how. You need to know about these debates so that you can decide for yourself which approach to take and then get actively involved. Taking part also helps you appreciate why you should do action research and how this can help you contribute actively to shaping the future for yourself, for others and for the world.

This chapter is organised into four sections that deal with these issues:

1. What action research is and is not
2. Different approaches to action research
3. Purposes of action research
4. When and when not to use action research

1. What action research is and is not

Action research is a practical form of enquiry that enables anyone in every job and walk of life to investigate and evaluate their work. They ask, 'What am I doing? Do I need to improve anything? If so, what? How do I improve it? Why should I improve it?' They produce their accounts of practice to show: (1) how they are trying to improve what they are doing; this involves first thinking about and learning how to do it better; (2) how this enables them to give meaning to their lives; and (3) how they are trying to influence others to do the same thing. These accounts stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish.

From this perspective, action research has become increasingly popular around the world as a way for all people to take action in their personal and social situations with a view to improving

them. It has also become popular as a form of professional learning across the professions and disciplines, including in business and management (Coghlan and Shani, 2016) and leadership studies (Branson et al., 2016; Davids and Waghid, 2017). It is particularly well developed in education, specifically in teaching, and in professional education, mainly in teacher education (Ellis and McNicholl, 2015) and nurse education (McDonnell and McNiff, 2016). A major attraction of action research is that everyone can do it, so it is for ‘ordinary’ practitioners as well as for principals, managers and administrators. It is not a case that only professional researchers can do action research: students and plumbers also can and should do action research (McNiff, 2016a). You can gain university accreditation for your action enquiries, as some of the case studies in this book show. In a practice setting, action research can therefore be a powerfully liberating form of professional enquiry because it means that practitioners themselves investigate their practices as they find ways to live more fully in the direction of their personal and social values. They are not told what to do; they decide for themselves what to do, in negotiation with others. This can work in relation to individual as well as collective enquiries. More and more groups of practitioners are getting together to investigate their collective work and put their stories of learning into the public domain. Your story can add to these and expand and strengthen them.

This is what makes action research distinctive. Practitioners research their own practices, which is different from most traditionalist forms of research where a professional researcher does research *on* rather than *with* practitioners. Traditionalist researchers tend to stand outside a situation and ask, ‘What are those people over there doing? How do we understand and explain what they are doing?’ This kind of research is often called outsider or spectator research: the kind of theory they generate is usually abstract and conceptual and is communicated through words. Action researchers, however, are insider researchers. They see themselves as part of the context they are investigating, and ask, individually and collectively, ‘Is my/our work going as we wish? How do we improve it where necessary?’ If they feel their work is already reasonably satisfactory, they evaluate it and produce evidence to show why they believe this to be the case. If they feel something needs improving, they work on that aspect, keeping records and producing regular oral and written progress reports about what they are doing. The kind of theory they produce is dynamic and developmental and communicated through their actions as well as their words.

Many varieties of action research are available these days and most are counted as legitimate within their own traditions, so researchers adopt different positionalities in relation with others in the research field (see page 14 of this book, which presents a summary of these positionalities). Remember, however, that regardless of the approach you choose, you will need to justify your stance and explain why you have chosen it.

Here are some examples of traditionalist research (outsider) questions and action research (insider) questions to show the difference between them.

Traditionalist research (outsider) questions

- What is the relationship between nurses’ practice-based knowledge and the quality of patient care?
- Does management style influence worker productivity?
- Will a different seating arrangement increase audience participation?

Action research (insider) questions

- How do I study my nursing practice for the benefit of the patients?
- How do I improve my management style to encourage productivity?
- How do I encourage greater audience participation through trying out different seating arrangements?

Notional action plans

Like all research, action research aims to be a disciplined, systematic process which at some point you make public (even if this is only handing in an assignment to your supervisor). As in all research it follows a notional action plan. Here are some of those action plans that show the process of everyday enquiry: they are notional in that you should see them as heuristics, ways of understanding a topic that you intend to investigate further.

A notional action plan can take this form:

- Take stock of what is going on.
- Identify a concern.
- Think of a possible way forward.
- Try it out.
- Monitor the action by gathering data to show what is happening.
- Evaluate progress by establishing procedures for making judgements about what is happening.
- Test the validity of claims to knowledge.
- Modify practice in light of the evaluation.

This action plan can then be turned into a set of questions that you can elaborate on as appropriate to your context, as follows:

- What is my concern? What issue do I wish to investigate?
- Why am I concerned? Why is this an issue? Why do I wish to investigate it?
- What is my research question? Have I several questions relating to different aspects of my research?
- How do I show the situation as it is and as it develops? What kind of data do I need to gather to show what is going on?
- What can I do about it? What will I do about it? What actions will I take?
- How do I evaluate what I am doing? How do I analyse and interpret my data to generate evidence?
- How do I test the validity of my claims to knowledge? How do I show that people can believe what I say?
- How do I check that any conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate? How do I avoid jumping to conclusions?
- How do I write a good quality report? How do I disseminate my findings so that other people can learn from and with me?
- How do I modify my ideas and practices in light of the evaluation? How will I use the learning I have acquired from doing my research to inform new practices? (See also McNiff, 2016b.)

In practical terms, this means you would identify a particular concern, try out a new way of doing things, gather, analyse and interpret the data on an ongoing basis, reflect on what was happening, check out any new understandings with others, and in light of your reflections try a different way that may or may not be more successful. As a nurse, for example, you would monitor and evaluate how you were relating to patients, and how they were responding to you (Higgs and Titchen, 2001; McDonnell, 2017; Rolfe, 1998). This would help you find the best way of working with patients to encourage their self-motivation towards recovery.

The process of 'observe – reflect – act – evaluate – modify – move in new directions' is generally known as action–reflection, although no single term is used in the literature. Because the process tends to be cyclical, it is often referred to as an action–reflection cycle (see Figure 1.1). The process is ongoing because as soon as you reach a provisional point where you feel things are satisfactory, that point itself raises new questions and it is time to begin again. Good visual models exist in the literature to communicate this process (Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2013).

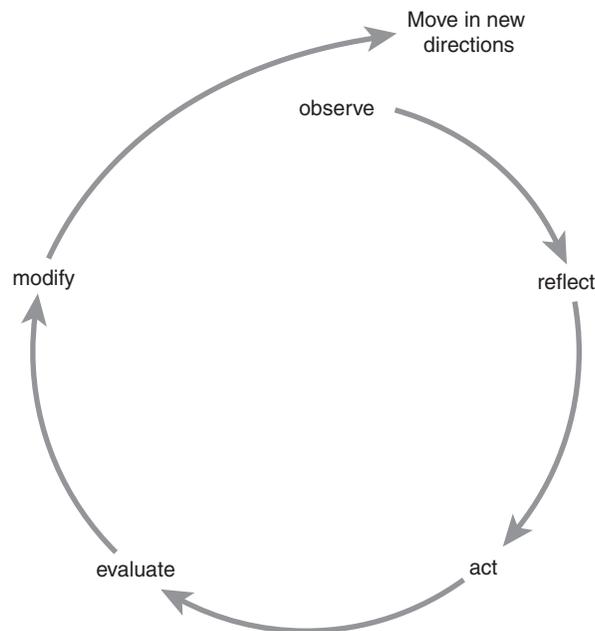


Figure 1.1 A typical action-reflection cycle

Here are some examples of action enquiries undertaken by real people:

- Colleen McLaughlin and Nazipa Ayubayeva (2015) developed an action research project into how they could support educational reform in Kazakhstan.
- Andrew Townsend and Pat Thomson (2015) worked with a collaborative team comprising staff from a water heritage museum, a university, teachers and artists: the aim was to improve educational practices through the use of art installations.

- Anbarah Al-Abdallah (2013), working in Qatar, wanted to help her learners develop greater proficiency in maths.
- Mzuzile Mpondwana (2008) wanted to find ways of developing better relationships among people living and working in a South African township.
- Susanne Winther (2016) from Denmark wanted to support a smoother transition from intensive care units to general wards.
- Each asked questions of the kind, 'How do I do this? How do I learn to do it better?'

2. Different approaches to action research

The action research family has been around for a long time, at least since the 1920s, and has become increasingly influential. As often happens, however, different family members have developed different opinions and interests, some have developed their own terminology, and some have formed breakaway groups, some of which have in turn become mainstreamed. You need to decide which kind of action research is best for you, which means developing at least a working knowledge of the field and taking a critical perspective to some key issues. These include the following:

- Different views of what action research is about and which perspective to take.
- Different forms of action research and different names and terminology.

Different views of what action research is about and which perspective to take

There is general agreement among the action research community that action research is about:

- action: taking action to improve practices, which is rooted in improving understanding; and ...
- research: finding things out and coming to new understandings, that is, creating new knowledge. In action research the knowledge is about how and why you should act in the world and to evaluate the effects of your actions.

There is disagreement about:

- the balance between taking action and doing research: many texts emphasise the need to take action but not to do research, and this turns action research into a form of personal-professional development but without a solid research/knowledge base that clarifies the reasons and purposes for the action;
- who does the action and who does the research, that is, who creates the knowledge about what is done and whether it has achieved its goals.

Furthermore, because knowledge contributes to theory, that is, explanations for how and why things happen, it becomes a question of who does the action and who generates the theory (explanations) about the action. To help clarify, take the example of a video shoot.

On most video shoots, some people are positioned, and frequently position themselves, as actors and agents (doers), while others see themselves as directors and producers (thinkers). Similarly, practitioners in workplaces are often seen as actors whose job is to do things, while 'official' researchers in research institutions such as universities are seen as directors and producers whose job is to provide the scripts for the practitioner-actors to speak, and to direct what they do. The directors and producers also provide explanations for what the actors are doing and why they are doing it. The hidden assumptions are that the actors are good at acting but are not able to theorise (explain) what they are doing, whereas the directors are good at theorising what the actors are doing and writing reports about it. Theory and practice are seen as separate, and theory is generally seen as more prestigious than practice. This attitude is commonplace in a good deal of (though not all) conventional social science research, where a researcher writes reports about what other people are doing. Ironically it is also now commonplace in certain forms of action research (see below). The difference between a conventional social science scenario and an action research scenario is that in social science research the aim is to demonstrate a causal relationship ('If I do this, that will happen'), whereas in action research the aim is to improve thinking and practice. The issue is always about the nature of relationships: who decides on what needs improving and how this should be done.

It can be useful here to draw on the ideas of positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003). In any social encounter, according to Harré and van Langenhove, people are positioned, or position themselves, in certain ways: for example, as speakers or listeners, or as insiders and outsiders. 'Positions' are not the same as 'roles': roles are more about job descriptions whereas positions are to do with relationships. Positions are therefore flexible and fluid, depending on the nature of the relationships and the interactions of participants. Relationships and positions are always created through what people say and do and how they say and do it (they are discursively constructed). Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 1) comment that 'our ways of talking do not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them'. Writers in the field of critical discourse analysis, including Fairclough (2003) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985), also emphasise that we negotiate who we are and who we become through what we say and do; however, this calls for critical reflection because it may become a case of one person imposing their ideas on another.

Herr and Anderson (2005: 32–45) used these kinds of concepts in drawing up a typology of researcher positionalities in research:

- Insider, studying their own practices: this involves self-study, autobiography, ethnomethodology.
- Insider, working collaboratively with other insiders.
- Insider, working collaboratively with outsiders.
- Reciprocal collaboration between insider–outsider teams.
- Outsiders working collaboratively with insiders.
- Outsiders studying insiders.
- Multiple positionalities.

These issues have also given rise to different perspectives and terminologies in the action research literatures. Further, other issues about types of knowledge and theory enter the debate: these are developed in Chapter 2.

Now, consider different forms of action research within the action research community itself.

Different forms of action research and different names and terminology

Until about the 1980s action research was a reasonably integrated field and the action research family was quite close-knit: these days it has fragmented into different groups, sometimes looking like tribes, and these also tend to use their own language and occupy their own territories or sectors, such as work-based learning or higher education. Some believe that the proper way to do research is for an external researcher to watch and report on what other practitioners are doing, as on the film set cited earlier. This is generally referred to as second- or third-person action research (see below). It is probably still the most common form of action research around and is the main form used in higher education settings, although first-person accounts are becoming increasingly accepted. There are also those who believe that a practitioner is able to offer their own explanations for what they are doing. This is referred to variously as first-person action research or self-study action research. Many people link this form with autoethnography (for example, Hunt, 2016); this view links with the long tradition of autobiography as philosophy (see Mathien and Wright, 2006). However, the differences between outsider and insider groupings are often not clear, because people often tend not to take a definitive stance, but position themselves somewhere between the two.

What is notable, however, is the different forms of theory (explanations) used. As mentioned above, traditionalist forms of theory tend to offer explanations about what 'they' are doing, and take a more conceptual form: they also tend to speak about action research as a technique to be applied. Person-centred forms of theory are more about what 'I' am doing as a living person. 'I' speak about action research as something I do, part of 'my' experience. 'My' theories take on a dynamic transformational form: the explanations the person offers for their life and practices are within the way they live and practise. So it is quite common nowadays to understand the word 'theory' in two ways: as an abstract propositional form about what is happening for other people, and as an embodied personal form about what is happening for me.

The language and definitions of action research are also in transition.

Reason and Bradbury (2008), for example, have developed a useful typology, which they call 'first-, second- and third-person action research'. They say that 'First-person research is the kind of research that enables the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act choicefully and with awareness, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting ...', that second-person research is when the practitioner can 'inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern ...', and that third-person research looks at influencing wider social systems, and to create '... a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other ... have an impersonal quality' (2008: 6). Others speak about participatory action research: this term was first used when action research came to prominence around the 1940s and 1950s and referred to groups who wished to reclaim lands and property taken from them; it was associated with the work of Orlando Fals Borda and shares the same heritage as scholars such as Paulo Freire. Today, the vocabulary of participatory action research continues to be used when emphasising the participative and collaborative nature of action research.

Other names, reflecting political commitments or positioning, include feminist participatory action research (Reid and Frisby, 2008), educational action research, practitioner action research and practice-based action research. At a tangent there is action learning, which emphasises the

actions of work-based learning rather than theory-generation (though action learning is shifting more and more towards action research these days), and action science, which takes a more scientific stance towards demonstrating causal relationships. Furthermore, many of these different groupings cross over or draw on other traditions such as narrative enquiry, appreciative enquiry and complexity theory, so it is difficult to see where one piece of scholarly territory ends and another begins.

Added to this, many people within these groupings prefer to speak only about reflective practice. However, taken on its own, reflective practice could be seen as people reflecting on what they are doing without necessarily taking action to improve it. You can sit all day reflecting on what you are doing but this is no use when trying to improve social situations with justification, which means drawing on a research base that demands personal accountability.

So here is a wonderful rich tapestry of people, all working with the same purpose of finding how to create a more socially just world from their different values and methodological commitments, and united in terms of what they stand for and against. It would be difficult for any beginning researcher to enter this world and immediately make sense of who is doing what and why, because there is no clearly delineated route map, and people who are active in the field move around and change perspective. Perhaps the best advice for beginning action researchers is to read as much as possible and keep a level head when dealing with different terminology. Keep in mind also that the key issues are about the politics of knowledge and theory, namely who counts as a knower, who is able to offer explanations, and about what, what counts as knowledge, and who makes decisions about these things. Keep in mind the difference between visions and interests and what Sowell said (1987: 8): 'We will do almost anything for our visions, except think about them'. Sowell's aim was to get people to think about their visions and why they hold them. This book does the same.

It is especially rewarding to see the same kind of commitment to diversity in community and to critical thinking reflected at an organisational level, too, as shown in the following accounts.

Pen Green, UK. Felicity Norton, Deputy Head of Centre and Coordinator of the Research, Training and Development base and Teaching School, writes:

'Pen Green, an integrated children's centre, nursery school, research and training base, established in 1983, is located in Corby, Northamptonshire, a former steel town with a rapidly rising though disadvantaged population. The centre offers high quality early years education and care, adult education, family support, health services, research and development, a range of short courses and higher education courses from Foundation Degree to PhD. The research base was established in 1996 to promote practitioner research in the early years. It now also has a strong publishing base.

'The content of Pen Green's programmes is influenced by constructivist approaches to teaching and learning for children and adults. This reflects a belief in engaging parents, families, the wider community and other agencies and professionals in equal and respectful partnerships. The multidisciplinary staff team, including teachers, social workers, health workers and early years practitioners, have developed a model of cooperative working that respects the learning and support needs of parents, and their children's right to high quality early years education with care. The Centre is recognised nationally and internationally for its commitments to developing quality services for children and their families, and to developing

leadership capacity throughout organisations and across the sector. This same commitment is reflected throughout the development of its programmes and its focus on specific teaching and learning strategies, including:

- the central importance of personal experience in learning;
- the importance of the learning climate;
- the involvement of learners in the identification of learning needs;
- the involvement of learners in the development of the learning experience, with tutors acting as guides and content resources;
- the mutual responsibility of learners and teachers for managing and developing learning experiences.

These principles acknowledge important factors relating to learner aspiration, commitment, motivation and involvement. All teaching teams are committed to an approach that encourages self-reflection, action research, and respect for practical wisdom.'

The Early Learning Initiative (Dublin, Ireland). Josephine Bleach, Director writes (adapted from Bleach, 2016):

'The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) is a community-based educational project in the National College of Ireland (NCI), and shares the learning from its action research-based process with local, national and international audiences. We, at ELI, believe that, if our work and action research as a methodological approach to organisational and community development are to influence wider practices, policy and theory, the learning from the process needs to be shared with others. A core element of this is to show how we learned together to realise our underpinning values as living practices ... The NCI is an Irish third level learning, teaching and research institution, with a long-standing commitment to widening participation in higher education (Bleach, 2013). As a third-level provider, it has a unique relationship with its local community in the Dublin Docklands and believes that early intervention is critical if educationally disadvantaged young people and their families from the area are to access third level education. The ELI is an integral part of NCI's mission to "change lives through education" (ELI, 2012). It is a potent symbol in its local community, providing pre-school, primary and second level students and their families with a visual reminder that they have a right to third level education and that with support it is within their reach.'

This brings us to ideas about the purposes of research in general and action research in particular.

3. Purposes of action research

The purpose of all research is to generate new knowledge. Action research, as part of a life of enquiry, generates the kind of knowledge that contributes to sustainable personal, social and planetary wellbeing.

As noted above, the term ‘action research’ contains the words ‘action’ and ‘research’. The action piece of action research is about taking action for improving practices. The ‘research’ piece of action research is about offering descriptions and explanations for what you are doing as and when you take action. Another word for ‘descriptions and explanations’ is ‘theory’. Like all research, the purpose of action research is (1) to generate new knowledge, which (2) feeds into new theory. When you generate new knowledge, you say that you know something now that you did not know before: for example, ‘I now know more about car mechanics’, or ‘I understand better how to dance properly’. Saying that you know something is called a knowledge claim, or a claim to knowledge. You need this knowledge in order to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it (to theorise what you are doing). You say, ‘I can describe and explain how and why I have learned about car mechanics’ or ‘I can describe and explain how and why it is important to dance properly’. Being able to explain what you are doing and why you are doing it also enables you to be clear about its significance for your field: this is important when it comes to saying why your research should be believed and taken seriously by others, especially peers.

By doing your action research you are hoping, therefore, to make knowledge claims such as the following:

- I have improved my practice as a teacher, and I can describe what I have done and explain why I have done it.
- I am a better manager than before because I have studied what I am doing, and I can explain how and why my practice is better.

Action research has always been understood as people taking action to improve their personal and social situations, and offering explanations for why they do so. Arendt (1958) states that ‘action’ is the highest form of human achievement and is the basis of liberal democracy: like Dewey (1933), she says that taking action involves active thinking. Some show the potentials of action research for achieving these aims through their work and writings (for example, Brydon-Miller, 2008; Heron and Reason, 2001; Noffke and Somekh, 2009). New work is emerging about ecoliteracy (Sinclair, 2017) and sustainable improvement (Chambers, 2008; Sterling, 2001). Educational action research is widely seen as a methodology for real-world social change. People communicate their ideas as theories of real-world practice, by explaining what they are doing, why they are doing it and what they hope to achieve. These personal theories are dynamic, in-the-world theories; they change and develop as people themselves change and develop. The aim of practitioners using an action research approach is to generate their personal and collective theories about how their learning has improved practices and is informing new practices for themselves and others.

The best accounts show the transformation of practice into personal theories. The individual practitioner asks, ‘What am I doing? How do I understand it in order to improve it? How can I draw on ideas in the literature and incorporate these into my own understanding? How do I transform those ideas into action?’ Asking these questions can help practitioners find practical ways of living in the direction of their educational and social values. The examples throughout this book show how this can be done, including this one from Sally Aston and Maria James, both of St Mary’s University, Twickenham, UK:

VALUES: RHETORIC OR REALITY - LAMINATED OR LIVED?

'In our Pecha Kucha presentation, we share how we strive to live our values in our practice. If, as Gibbs says, this acknowledgement can develop "an inner knowing of being true to oneself in who we are" and an "inner peace in being meaningfully connected with self in time and place" (2006: 18), then this self-knowledge becomes an imperative on an organisational and individual basis. We have, historically, adopted our own personal values as standards of judgement for research, seeking to move from a state of incongruity to a greater sense of shalom and dynamic stability. This sense has begun to be developed in our professional practice through: articulating our educational values; striving to live more in the direction of them; and asking others to use them as standards of judgement by which our claims might be judged. A new potential initiative that we will introduce concerns the value and virtues of applying for the Values Based Education International Kitemark for our School of Education.'

4. When and when not to use action research

You can use action research for many purposes, but not for all.

When to use action research

Use action research when you want to evaluate whether your work is contributing to your own or other people's learning, or whether you need to do something different: you could see this as acting for yourself, for others and for the world. For example, you may want to do this for the following reasons.

- For yourself, to contribute to your understanding:
 - Patient waiting times in the hospital are too long. How are you going to find out why, so that you can do something about the situation?
 - Your students are achieving remarkably high scores. Why? Is it your teaching, their extra study, or a new classroom environment?
- For others, to contribute to their understanding:
 - How do you learn to encourage people to be more positive?
 - How do you learn to improve your own timekeeping?
- For the world, to contribute to wider thinking through the literatures and media:
 - How do you promote efforts to develop more inclusive pedagogies?
 - How do you communicate ideas about basic patient care?

When not to use action research

Do not use action research if you want to draw comparisons, show statistical correlations or demonstrate a cause-and-effect relationship. For example:

- You want to see whether adults who are accompanied by children are more likely to wait at pedestrian crossings than those who are not accompanied by children, so you would do an observational study and include statistical analyses of a headcount.
- You want to show the effects of good leadership on organisational motivation. You could interview a sample of employees and analyse their responses. You could probably also interview a sample of business leaders and get their opinions on the relationship between their leadership and the quality of employees' motivation.

These are standard social science topics where researchers ask questions of the kind, 'What are those people doing? What do they say? How many of them do it? How do we account for what they think?' Action research questions, however, take the form, 'How do I understand what I am doing? How do I improve it? How do I account for what I think?' They place the emphasis on the researcher's intent to take action for personal and social improvement.

A point to remember is that these kinds of social science topics can be included within practitioner-researchers' personal theories of practice. Action research projects that ask questions in the form of 'How do I ...?' usually (though not always) need to contain pieces of empirical research that respond to questions in the form of 'What is happening here?' This kind of fact-finding then acts as the basis for taking action to improve real-world situations.

Here is an example to show how 'How do I ...?' questions often begin with 'What is happening here?' questions, which then act as the basis for focused social action.

Table 1.1 Turning 'How do I ...?' questions into social intent

'How do I/we ...?' questions	'What is happening here?' questions	'What shall we do about it?' questions
How do I/we coordinate our adult community learning programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How many colleagues are involved in the programme? • What is their background? • In what ways are they involved in the programme? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What strategies will help us to coordinate our programme successfully? • How can we learn more about coordinating community learning programmes?
How do I/we encourage students to read more educational books?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kind of books do students read at present? • How many categories of books are in the college library? • How much time is given to independent reading in the curriculum? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do I/we encourage students to read more widely? • How do we persuade the librarian to buy in more educational books? • Can we as a team redevelop the curriculum to ensure a broader reading base?

Summary

This chapter has set out some core issues in action research. It has explained that, unlike traditionalist forms of social science, action research places the individual 'I' at the centre of an enquiry. Different forms of action research have emerged over the years which prioritise different aspects. Action research can be useful when investigating how to improve learning and take social action. It is inappropriate for investigations that aim to draw comparisons or establish cause-and-effect relationships.

The next chapter deals with the interesting and contested question of who can do action research, who says, and whose interests it serves to perpetuate mythologies.

EXERCISES

- Check that you are reasonably clear about what action research is and what it is not. Be aware that different books say different things, so what you are reading here is one person's view of action research. Decide for yourself: do you accept it or not? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Talk with your colleagues and see what they say. Do you agree with them? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Write out some 'outsider'- and 'insider'-type questions. Compare what you have written with what colleagues have written.
- Also write out two situations when you would not use an action research approach and two situations when you would.