

Action research

Basic position

Although this research tradition is also firmly case-based, it represents a move from a descriptive/interpretive stance to an interventionist position, where a key aim of the research is to understand better some aspect of professional practice as a means of bringing about improvement. This may involve institution-wide investigation, producing recommendations that are implemented by relevant groups, the new practices being assessed by the researchers, who report back and, if necessary, recommend further changes or refinements. Alternatively, an individual may engage in action research with a view to improving their own practice. Participatory or emancipatory action research involves groups of concerned practitioners who work together to improve not only their own practice but also the situation in which they work. As two leading proponents of this approach note, its aims are not merely instrumental:

There are two essential aims of action research: to *improve* and to *involve*. Action research aims at improvement in three areas: firstly, the improvement of a *practice*; secondly, the improvement of the *understanding* of the practice by its practitioners; and thirdly, the improvement of the *situation* in which the practice takes place. The aim of *involvement* stands shoulder to shoulder with the aim of *improvement*. (Carr and Kemmis 1986:165, original italics)

The element of personal and professional investment in the research itself and in its outcomes is another aspect that marks this research as different from the other traditions described here.

Methods used

The characteristic approach associated with this tradition is the action research spiral of planning→acting and observing→reflecting→planning, and so on. (The following description follows a tradition familiar in TESOL and focuses on the practitioner–researcher, though it is possible for the researcher not to be involved in the practice.) The process begins with reflection on some aspect of the practitioner–researcher’s work that leads to possible lines of intervention, then once the nature of the intervention has been decided a plan is developed

and implemented within the context of professional practice. The implementation is monitored by the practitioner-researcher(s) (and possibly others, in the case of a team project or complementary projects) and when analysis of this leads to a better understanding of relevant processes, this is used as the basis for further reflection, which in turn may indicate the need to plan further intervention. The description suggests an eternal cycle spiralling through a professional life, but in practice there will be limits to what is possible or desirable, and a project may concentrate on a single cycle. The data sources we have seen in the first three traditions (interviews, recordings, documents, observation) may be used here to inform the planning and to provide a picture of the implementation, though journal keeping by the practitioner-researcher is perhaps more prominent than in other traditions.

Possible outcomes of research

The language teacher in our hypothetical TESOL situation might reflect on their treatment of new students and decide that intervention would be appropriate. The nature of appropriate intervention might be apparent to the teacher, or it may be necessary to wait for a new intake, keep a journal and record lessons in order to build up a picture of the ways in which induction is handled in class. Analysis of this might reveal very prescriptive teacher-centred approaches that are not conducive to building a classroom community, so the teacher might develop a set of more appropriate strategies for achieving this end. These strategies could then be implemented with the next intake and their success evaluated on the basis of journals, recordings and perhaps interviews.

Some key concepts

Action research is typically associated with a *cycle* of activities and the term *empowerment* is often associated with its outcomes. Where this is used, it embeds the research within a professional context where the practitioner seeks, through deeper understanding and intervention, to bring about changes in their working practices and to explore the *emancipatory* potential of their activities.

Potential relevance to TESOL

In the light of its popularity, the case for action research in TESOL perhaps does not need to be made (for an eloquent expression of its value, see Edge 2001b), but its legitimacy as a serious research tradition needs to be underlined. Provided that appropriate methods of data collection and analysis are used, it offers a potentially rich source of professional

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understanding (and incentive to action) derivable from the fully articulated particular case.

Challenges

Unfortunately, the status of action research has not been accepted in all quarters because its popularity with practitioner-researchers and with others involved in professional development has led to the term being applied to a wide range of practices, some of them falling far short of the minimum criteria for acceptable QI. Its instrumental orientation will always bring with it this risk, but that should not be allowed to undermine its appeal to the serious researcher.