

Teacher as Researcher- Taking Action Research to Task

When Katrina Shaw decided it was time to integrate an Internet-based project into her American history course, she knew she wanted to find a way to measure whether students were truly benefiting from the time they spent in front of the computer.

Enter *action research*. By setting up a small, semi-informal classroom research project, Ms. Shaw was able to record and analyze the difference the use of the computer made in her course. She then updated her teaching plans to include more Internet-based projects such as the one used in her action research.

Action research can be as simple as testing a new teaching method, or it can answer far more complex questions about curriculum, school management, or other large, multidimensional issues.

What is Action Research?

Simply put, action research is the process of systematically testing new ideas in the classroom or school, analyzing the results, and deciding to implement the new idea or begin the process again with another idea.

Action research differs from formal research conducted by education theorists because it is typically designed and controlled by the teacher him- or herself or in collaboration with other practitioners.

There is a considerable amount of literature devoted to the subject of action research. Hence, there are also a variety of interpretations as to what constitutes it. Our definition broadly defines the term.

To summarize, classroom action research is characterized by the following:

- Begins with a question, such as "Why don't my students write better notes?"

- Proposes a classroom-based practice (intervention) to change the identified problem, such as "Will using a graphic organizer to teach a concept improve note-taking skills?"

- Uses a systematic approach to testing and analyzing the idea or intervention (Did it improve their skills? How?)

- Is teacher or practitioner directed

- Has an end goal of improving a teaching practice or other educational process.

Why Conduct Action Research in Your Classroom?

Many teachers argue that the problem with theory is that it ignores practice. Theory is often tied to large-scale research projects designed and conducted by educational researchers, with little or no teacher input.

Of course, this research has an important place in the field of education; still, it is difficult to distill much of it into definable practices that will change the way we teach. Action research, however, stands as a teacher's best chance at using critical inquiry to activate change, on their own terms.

There are typically three different levels of action research. The first level is conducted by an individual to test methods for implementation in the classroom. The second level is undertaken by a group testing a method for use department or grade. The third level involves teachers, administrators and other stakeholders; its purpose is to affect change in the larger school community.

We offer a list of five compelling reasons to conduct at least one action research project this year.

1. It will help you build a reflective practice, based on proven techniques.
2. It allows you to try out new ideas and reliably assess their effectiveness.
3. It will build confidence in your instructional decisions.
4. It contributes to the professional culture of teaching at your school.
5. It can create meaningful and lasting change in your practice, your students' learning, and your school.

How to Conduct Action Research: A Simple Methodology

In order to conduct your research systematically, you need to choose an action research method. There are many available, some more rigorous than others. Here we offer a simplified set of steps that are included in most action research projects. Ultimately, you must choose to follow one, or to define one of your own based on your readings.

1. Identify the question, issue, or problem.

This is always your starting point. You may need time to determine the right focus for your question.

2. Define a solution.

This will be an intervention of some sort, perhaps a technique, new environment, or new material that you feel has potential to correct the problem.

3. Apply the intervention and collect data regarding the intervention.

Here you will need to define how you will apply the technique and the method you will use to collect your data collection. If possible, it is helpful to have at least two groups that you can use for your research, one for the test group and one for the control group (the group that doesn't get a new technique). You will need to define ahead of time how you will record reactions to your intervention.

4. Analyze your findings.

This is where having a control group to compare your test groups can help you determine whether the technique has caused a desirable change, an undesirable change, or no change at all.

5. Take action.

This can be either in the form of revising your intervention and returning to Step 2 to test another intervention, or by changing your practice to reflect a successful new technique.

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