

Search RESINED

powered by [FreeFind](#)

[Home](#)

[Beginning Research](#) | [Action Research](#) | [Case Study](#) | [Interviews](#) | [Observation Techniques](#)
| [Education Research in the Postmodern](#)

[Evaluation Research in Education](#) | [Narrative](#) | [Presentations](#) | [Qualitative Research](#) |
[Quantitative Methods](#) | [Questionnaires](#) | [Writing up Research](#)

Action Research in Education

Currently overseen by Maureen Parker

Originally prepared by Dr Stephen Waters-Adams

© S Waters-Adams, Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth, 2006

CONTENTS

Part One: [Introduction](#)

Part Two: [A Theoretical Underpinning for Action Research in Education](#)

Part Three: [Doing Action Research](#)

Part Four: [Limitations and Criticisms of Action Research](#)

Part Five: [Tasks](#)

Part Six: [Further Reading](#)

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

1 Why should I use action research?

Because you want to change your practice. You may be concerned that things might not be going as you wish, or you may need to implement a new initiative but are unsure how to do it effectively. What you want is a way of sorting out these concerns that offers practical solutions, but that derives from the specific circumstances of your practice. You know that someone else's solution may have merit, but that it is never quite right for the individual situation within which you work. You know that practice is always influenced by context.

2 How does this qualify as research?

Because the act of finding your solution makes you understand your practice better – not only what you are doing, but also the factors that affect what you do. Action research therefore has two aspects. The starting point is to sort out a problem or issue in practice; to this extent an action researcher seeks a solution. But the process can also be used as a deliberate attempt to understand practice better – a traditional research attitude. What is most important in both approaches is that you are open, honest and rigorous.

3 What do we mean by practice?

From the perspective of action research, the best way to think about practice is the way you carry out your professional actions. This is, of course, what you do, but it is also why you think you should be doing things the way you do. You will hear of the 'theory-practice divide'; action research as an approach cuts across this divide, encouraging a practitioner to consider both aspects as part of a single whole.

The aim of an action researcher is to bring about development in his or her practice by analysing existing practice and identifying elements for change. The process is founded on the gathering of evidence on which to make informed rather than intuitive judgements and decisions. Perhaps the most important aspect of action research is that the process enhances teachers' professional development through the fostering of their capability as professional knowledge makers, rather than simply as professional knowledge users. In an age of centralisation and the proliferation of national guidelines and strategies, action research can help teachers feel in control of their own professional situation.

Consider:

- What aspects of your professional practice are you currently interested in

developing?

4 What is action research about?

Action research is a practical approach to professional inquiry in any social situation. The examples in this component relate to education and are therefore of particular relevance to teachers or lecturers engaged in their daily contact with children or students. But professional practice need not be teaching: it may be management or administration in a school or college, or it may be in an unrelated area, such as medicine or the social services. The context for professional inquiry might change, but the principles and processes involved in action research are the same, regardless of the nature of the practice.

Indeed, action research did not arise in education (see Lewin 1948), but was applied to the development of teaching as its potential was identified. Of particular influence was the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, who famously advocated that 'curriculum research and development ought to belong to the teacher' (Stenhouse, 1975 p. 142). He was most adamant that 'it is not enough that teachers' work should be studied: they need to study it themselves' (p.143).

Key text: Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London, Heinemann. (particularly ch.10 – The Teacher as Researcher)

As its name suggests, action research concerns actors – those people carrying out their professional actions from day to day – and its purpose is to understand and to improve those actions. It is about trying to understand professional action from the inside; as a result, it is research that is carried out by practitioners on their own practice, not (as in other forms of research), done by someone on somebody else's practice. Action research in education is grounded in the working lives of teachers, as they experience them.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being about:

- the improvement of practice;
- the improvement of the understanding of practice;
- the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.

The notion of improvement can be problematic when viewed from the outside. One person's improvement can be another person's deterioration. It depends on the beliefs and values underpinning the individual's perspective. Paradoxically, however, this uncertainty is perhaps the one truth of professional practice. Practice is contingent upon the practitioners' intentions, values and beliefs and the situation in which those elements are given form. Educational research through action research does not produce understanding that has universal truth; it is about me in the here and now understanding what I can do to ensure my values and intentions are realised in my teaching situation. If my deliberations produce an understanding which helps me, then I can offer it to others to try. In this sense, action research can produce generalisations about practice, but such generalisations are only part of a wider search for understanding. They are not directly applicable beyond the contingencies of my practice. Hamilton (1981) encapsulated this

when he reflected that 'to generalise is to render a public account of the past, present or future in a form that can be 'tested' through further action and inquiry'.

Consider:

- To what extent do you ever merely implement a teaching directive? Is it possible?

The reality of practice in a social situation means that it is impossible to separate the three areas Carr and Kemmis mention. Focus on one may give insights into the others, for it is frequently impossible to improve teaching without understanding the dynamics of the situation in which that teaching is carried out. Children, students, classrooms and colleges all vary, as do the management structures, schemes of work, course programmes and assessment procedures which impose structure on them. Practice is not easily packaged! Some writers about action research, Carr and Kemmis amongst them, have explored the potentially political nature of analysis within the process that follows from this realisation and have promoted action research as a means of social change. They see action research as being 'emancipatory', producing an understanding of the workplace that is empowering professionally.

Key text: Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes, Falmer.

Action research can thus be used to:

- understand one's own practice;
- understand how to make one's practice better;
- understand how to accommodate outside change in one's practice;
- understand how to change the outside in order to make one's practice better.

5 How does action research work?

At its heart, action research involves the careful monitoring of planned change in practice. A decision is taken that a particular action may either yield improvements or provide information as to the nature of the teaching situation. The action is thus used as a research tool. Both elements of action and research are of equal prominence in the approach. It can be thought of as:

research on action
by using
action as a tool for research

with the process being driven by a dialogue between the elements of:

action and the intentions behind action

or

practice and the values behind practice.

Emphasising the individual nature of action research, Jack Whitehead (1985) puts forward a simple representation of how the process feels:

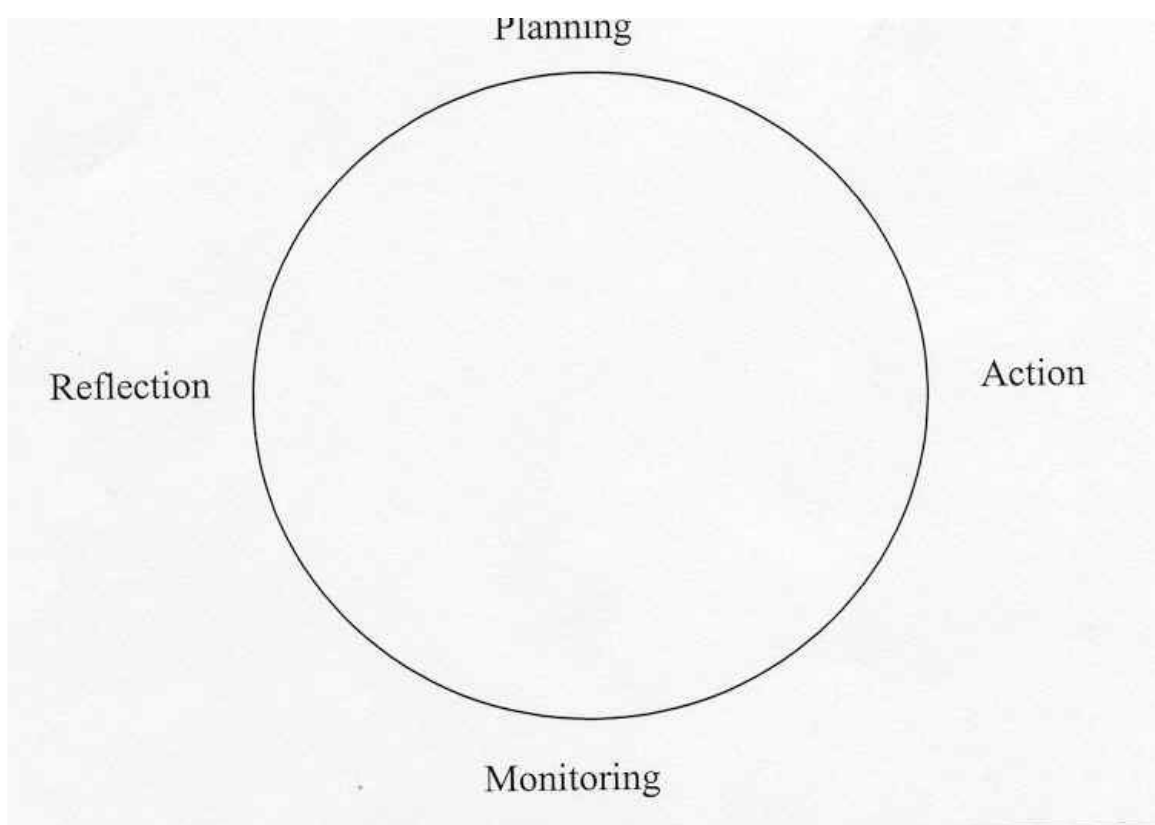
1. I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice;
2. I imagine a solution to my problem;
3. I act in the direction of the solution;
4. I evaluate the outcomes of my actions;
5. I modify my problems, ideas and actions in the light of my evaluations.

(p.98)

Key text: Whitehead, J. (1985) An Analysis of an Individual's Educational Development: the basis for personally oriented action research, in: Shipman, M. (ed.) *Educational Research: principles, policies and practices*, Lewes, Falmer.

5 The action research 'cycle'

At the simplest level, therefore, action research involves a spiral or cycle of planning, action, monitoring and reflection:



This sequence underpins the process of the inquiry but be prepared to find fuzzy edges between the stages as your inquiry proceeds. For a start, you will probably not start with planning; there may be much monitoring and observation of existing practice (reconnaissance) before you are ready to plan and implement a change. As you become more involved with your research, you may find it hard to detach one element of the process from another. You may find yourself reflecting as you are acting – something that Donald Schön (1983) calls 'knowing-in-action' – and monitoring also will take place as action proceeds. However, once that first change is implemented the action research cycle proceeds generally in the above manner.

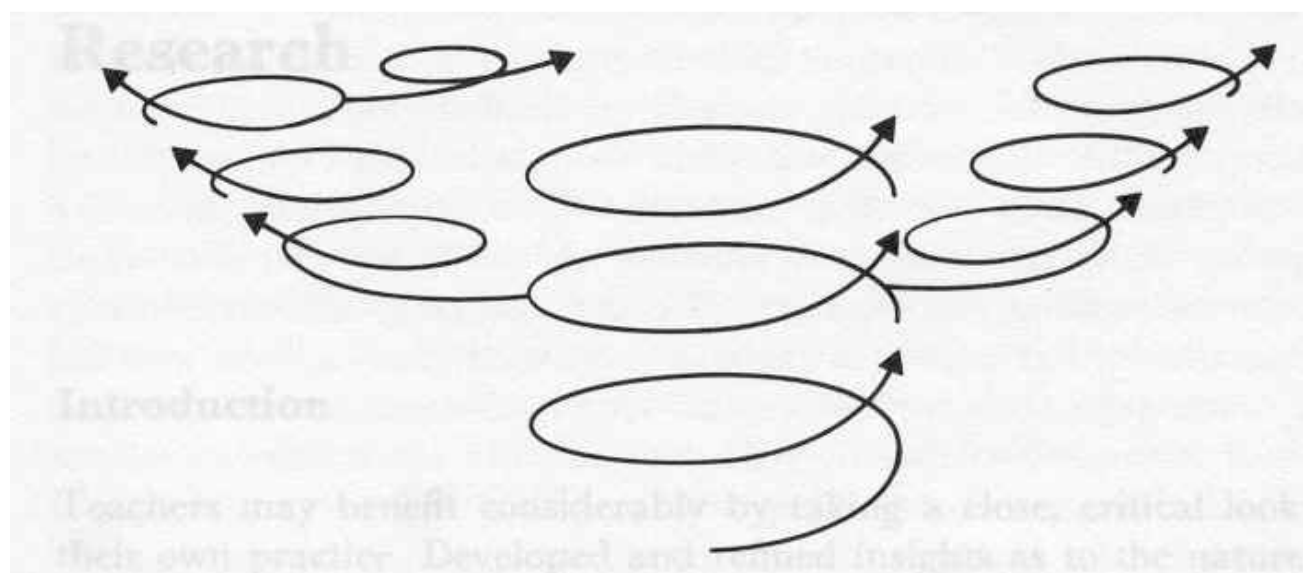
This basic structure has been elaborated in different representations of the same process – see, for example, Elliott (1981), Kemmis and McTaggart (1982), Ebbutt, (1985), McKernan (1988) - each of which promotes the same cyclical or spiral approach to action and reflection.

Consider:

- Can you see any limitations or problems with this kind of approach to professional development?
- Make a note of them and review them as you go through the rest of the component.

All representations of the action research process on paper are simplistic. In reality, life is

complex and things rarely go as planned. Indeed, although action research may start with a carefully planned action, the nature of the process makes the outcomes uncertain. Links emerge with aspects that were not anticipated - perhaps the timing of the session (first thing after lunch break) is as important a factor as the grouping I'm using? - and the inquiry can deviate from its original path as these aspects are explored. McNiff (1988, p 45), drawing on the work of Whitehead, reminds us of the 'messiness' of action research, showing a process that becomes spirals on spirals:



Key text: McNiff, J. (1988) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*, Basingstoke, Macmillan

6 Individual or collaborative?

So far, this account has focused on the individual nature of action research, reflecting Whitehead's perspective on the process. This is not to say that groups of people within a school or college cannot undertake a collaborative action research project, exploring how best to change institutional practice, but it is important to realise the individual nature of practice itself. If reflection on practice involves engaging with intentions, values and beliefs, then strong elements of these will be intensely personal. However, some writers about action research claim that the 'best' (by which they mean the most 'emancipatory') action research is collaborative in nature, involving groups of people exploring and challenging the constraints of their professional lives. See, for example, Elliott (1991).

Key text: Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

There is a sense in which collaboration can be an extremely important element of action research. In striving to reach an understanding of their practice, action researchers will want to seek validity in what Whitehead calls their 'claims to knowledge'. In order to achieve this, the most thorough critique of data is desirable. There is a limit to the potential of individual reflection; action researchers should seek the views of others as to

the meaning of the data they have collected. In this way, the action research process becomes a little like the process of science – there is an epistemological necessity for collaboration in the interpretation of data. The more ideas one can gather, the nearer one might get to the meaning of the data. Indeed, Carr and Kemmis describe action research as a 'critical educational science'.

Consider:

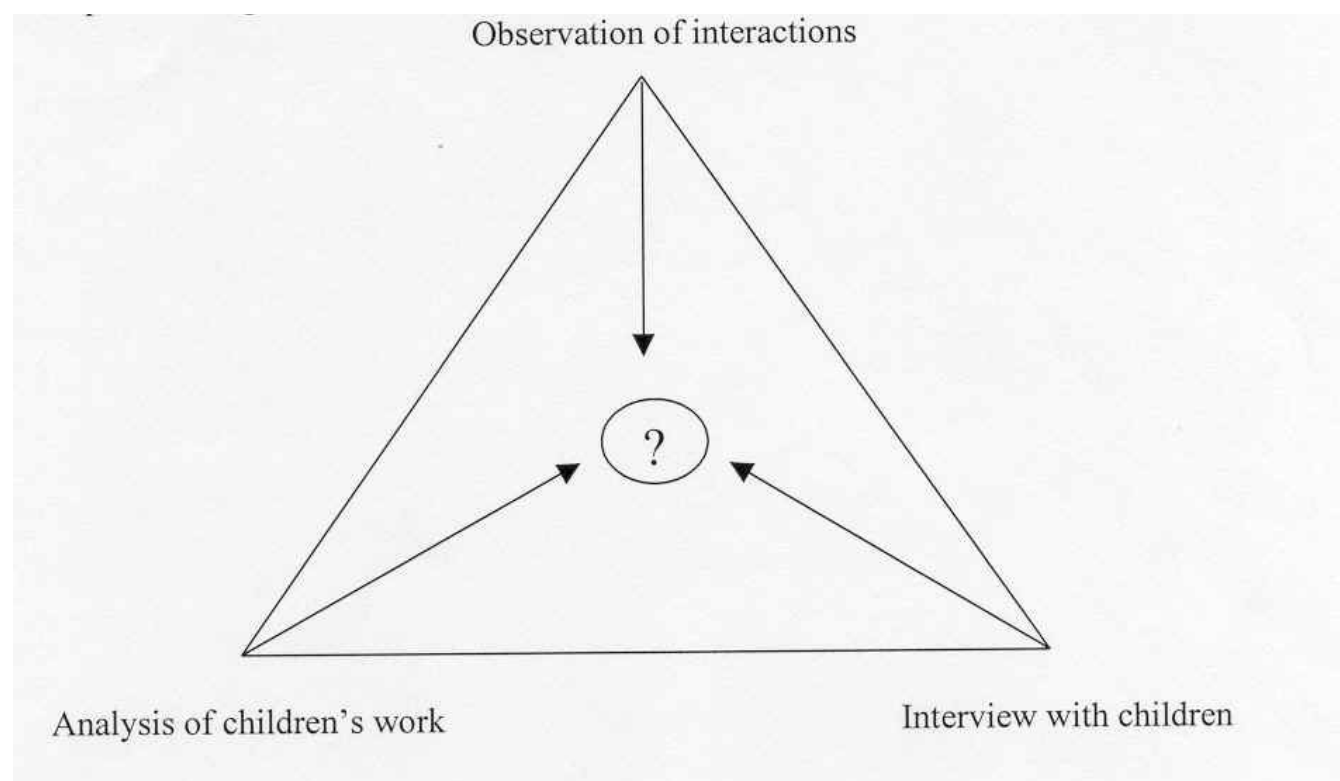
- How might you enable or encourage collaboration in action research in your place of work?
- What factors might help or hinder it?

7 Methods

The prime criterion for choosing a particular data gathering method in action research is whether it is anticipated that the method will give useful information about the practice under study. It is sometimes thought that methods used in action research are purely qualitative. This does not have to be true. Although the overall analysis of the data generated by any methods used will be qualitative in nature, numerical or statistical information may be of great value to that analysis. For example, a statistical breakdown of examination or SATs passes may be a useful piece of data when exploring the effect of aspects of practice.

What is most important is that the researcher understands that different research methods illuminate only particular aspects of a situation. None give a whole picture. In seeking evidence of her practice, or the effectiveness of a change in practice, a teacher needs to look at it from different perspectives; she needs to employ a triangulation of methods. This is a simple principle, involving the careful choice of a range of data gathering techniques, each of which might illuminate a different aspect of the same issue:

The principle of triangulation:



In this case, ? might be children's engagement during science sessions. Each method will give access to different aspects of the situation. There will still be areas not illuminated, but more is known than if only one method is used. Also, cross-referencing of data from different methods adds to the overall reliability of the research process. (See also the section on [Triangulation](#) in the component on Qualitative Research by Peter Woods.)

As long as they are aware of the limitations of a particular method, action researchers may thus use any of the following to help them reflect on their concern:

- [observation schedules](#) – of children, students or themselves;
- audio and video tape recording;
- [structured or semi-structured interviews](#);
- class records;
- [statistical indicators](#);
- [field notes](#);
- an analytic memo;
- sociometry;
- photography;
- repertory grids;
- [questionnaires](#);
- etc.!

The list may seem daunting, but each method enables a particular perspective to be taken on a situation. Cohen et al (2000) and Hopkins (1993) both give comprehensive explanations of these data gathering methods, carefully exploring their advantages, disadvantages and potential uses.

8 Summary

- Action research is a practical way for individuals to explore the nature of their practice and to improve it.
- Action research encourages practitioners to become knowledge-makers, rather than merely knowledge-users.
- Action research uses action as a means of research; planned change is implemented, monitored and analysed.
- Action research proceeds in an action-reflection cycle or spiral.
- The process can be messy; as research proceeds, wider links are likely to be identified.
- Action research is carried out by individuals, but these individuals may work collaboratively.
- Action researchers may use a variety of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative.
- Action researchers must ensure triangulation in their methods.

[Back to Top](#)

PART TWO

A THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING FOR ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

Consider:

- On what basis might action research be justified as a valid exploration of practice?
- Make notes, then read on.

1 Understanding practice

It was mentioned above that action research cuts across the theory-practice divide, adopting a position which implies that both elements are part of each other. Carr and Kemmis (1986) state that:

Teaching....can only be understood by reference to the framework of thought in terms of which its practitioners make sense of what they are doing. Teachers could not even begin to 'practise' without some knowledge of the situation in which they are operating and some idea of what it is that needs to be done.

(p.113)

This statement in itself does not imply anything other than a cause-effect relationship between theory and practice, but Carr and Kemmis move quickly to highlight what they see as a crucial reciprocity between the two:

The twin assumptions that all 'theory' is non-practical and all 'practice' is non-theoretical are, therefore, entirely misguided..... 'Theories' are not bodies of knowledge that can be generated out of a practical vacuum and teaching is not some kind of robot-like mechanical performance that is devoid of any theoretical reflection. Both are practical undertakings whose guiding theory consists of the reflective consciousness of their respective practitioners.

(p.113)

In this view, a practitioner's action cannot be considered as simply containing propositions which stand outside that action and direct it. Both proposition and practice are in a process of mutual construction of each other. As the teacher teaches, she is giving concrete form to ideas (tacit or espoused) which are clarified, extended or contradicted by her practice. Elliott (1991) suggests that there is a difference between ideas 'about' education and the 'educational' meaning of an idea that can only become clear in action. Such reasoning is close to that of Whitehead (1985, 1989). Pursuing the idea that all practice is driven by the participants' values, whether articulated or not, he considers that their meaning can *only* be identified through consideration of practice.

This intimate relationship between theory and practice is explored in depth by Winter (1987, 1989). Winter suggests that any social practice is constituted by a complex of contradictory elements, which are 'experienced in almost instantaneous succession as a single essence and a plurality of qualities, as universal and specific, as self-defined and as defined-in-relation-to-another' (Winter 1987, p.12). He claims that any attempt to understand practice must be dialectical (see Part Three – [Analysis](#)). The understanding which informs practice is not 'theory', standing outside practice, but a process of 'theorising' in which meaning resides in the relationships between the elements which constitute the practice. Within this perspective, the reality of a teacher's understanding is impossible to construct in propositional terms, but can only be accessed by appreciating the dialectical interplay of these elements as they exist in the experience of practice. Woods (1996) describes how this appreciation of the multilayered nature of reality has informed methodological discussion in the postmodern era of educational research. Approaching the field particularly from the perspective of ethnography (see Woods, 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), he claims that we cannot understand the reality of practice without trying to identify the nature of the competing perspectives which constitute it. It does not exist 'out there', but in the continuing interaction between participants and those participants' intentions, beliefs and values. (See also the component on [Qualitative Research](#) by Peter Woods.)

This understanding of reality exposes the *reflexivity* of our consciousness. When faced with the challenge of understanding a situation, we cannot do so without using our existing ideas and beliefs to help us interpret. Understanding thus becomes personal; there is no inevitability of meaning dictated by the facts themselves.

2 The requirements for a research approach

The theory-ladenness of action and the reflexivity of consciousness present difficulties when it comes to the understanding of professional practice. The first suggests that it can only be fully understood from the inside; the second that an outside interpretation will inevitably impose meanings on a situation which may or may not be there. Yet the world of education and other professional disciplines is full of outside solutions or recommendations for individuals' practice. Altricher et al. (1993) suggest that two differing 'rationalities' are in conflict here, the technical and the reflective:

Technical rationality suggests that:

- there are general solutions to practical problems;
- these solutions can be developed outside the practical situations, in research or administrative centres;
- the solutions can be translated into teachers' actions by means of publications, training, administrative orders, etc.

Reflective rationality suggests that:

- complex practical problems demand specific solutions;
- these solutions can be developed only inside the context in which the problem arises and in which the practitioner is a crucial and determining element;
- the solutions cannot be directly applied to other contexts, but can be made accessible to other practitioners as hypotheses to be tested.

The application of action research to education arose out of a dissatisfaction with the technical approach to curriculum development. Because education is a practical enterprise, the resolution of educational problems can only take place by adopting a *course of action* and this action cannot exist outside the practitioners' history, beliefs and values. To help practitioners understand what course of action to take, it was essential to have a research approach that would help illuminate the personal complexities of their own situation. The clear reflective rationality of action research enables it to do that.

3 Reaching a definition of action research

Hollingsworth et al. (1997) begin the concluding chapter of Hollingsworth's (1997) review of international action research projects with the somewhat alarming statement that:

If there is one single pattern that emerges from these chapters, it is that the forms, purposes, methods and results of action research around the world differ widely.

(Hollingsworth et al., 1997, p.312)

This situation is widely acknowledged. Carr (1989), commenting on the widely differing examples collated in Hustler et al. (1986), pointed to the **diversity of understanding** that was developing throughout the eighties, and the position is still similar. Carr suggested at the time that 'action research now means different things to different people and, as a result, the action research movement often appears to be held together by little more than a common contempt for academic theorising and a general disenchantment with 'mainstream' research.' (p.85).

Early work in action research by Lewin with regard to group dynamics (Lewin, 1948) raised the idea that **social practices could only be understood and changed by involving the practitioners themselves throughout an inquiry**. The aim of the practitioner research, however, was to solve a problem already identified from the outside. McKernan suggests that Lewin considered action research to be a form of 'rational management or social engineering' (McKernan, 1991, p.18). In common with contemporaries who began to apply action research to education (Corey, 1953; Taba, 1962), Lewin advocated a tightly controlled systematic methodology, based on evidence and evaluation. The aim was social or curriculum improvement, with the process driven by a goal determined at the outset which could be redefined so that it remained appropriate.

Action research in education declined in the sixties, when a top-down, research, development and dissemination (RD&D) model pervaded the educational establishment. It reappeared in the seventies and became linked with the idea of '**teacher as researcher**' advocated by Stenhouse (Stenhouse 1975). The aim of the research now moved from the 'technical', goal-oriented, end of achieving a practice that 'worked', to a more general 'practical' aim of understanding what made the practice what it was. But with this different perspective, a number of different conceptions of the purpose and nature of the process appeared, obscuring a clear definition.

Some writers, for example Carr and Kemmis (1986) and Elliott (1991) have chosen to represent action research as a number of clearly distinct processes, linked in some kind of hierarchy of effectiveness. Their justification for a hierarchy resides around either the level of collaborative activity or the mode of analysis used. Elliott distinguishes between 'isolated' and what he sees as the necessarily **collaborative 'educational' action research**, claiming that when teachers reflect in isolation from each other they are likely to 'reduce action research to a form of technical rationality aimed at improving their technical skills' (Elliott 1991, p.55). What he calls 'educational' action research is, he claims, concerned more with the process of inquiry than its products and is empowering, enabling teachers to 'critique the curriculum structures which shape their practices and the power to negotiate change within the system that maintains them' (p.55). The aim of action research for Elliott is to promote a teacher's 'practical wisdom' (Elliott, 1989) and can be thought of as a 'moral science' in which the aim is to realise moral values in practice.

Carr and Kemmis also suggest that action research can be differentiated into **three clearly distinct types: 'technical', 'practical' and 'emancipatory'**. They draw parallels between these types and general modes of inquiry in the social sciences, claiming that they relate to three 'general forms that the human and social sciences can take (empirical, interpretive, critical)' (Carr, 1985, p.6, in Whitehead and Lomax (1987) p.178)) and that they represent the three 'knowledge-constitutive' interests identified by Habermas (Habermas 1972). Within these 'interests', the supposed objectivity of the

positivist (scientific) paradigm actually conceals a 'technical' need for prediction and control. In contrast, interpretative social science has the 'practical' interest of understanding why a situation is as it is and how effective communication is promoted within it, but it works at the level of subjective understandings. Only a reflexive, 'critical', stance which exposes the context within which subjective understandings are formed, will serve the 'emancipatory' interests of people by freeing them from the 'dictates of compulsions of tradition, precedent, habit, coercion, as well as self-deception' (Grundy and Kemmis, 1982, p. 16, in Wallace, (1987) p.108). According to Carr and Kemmis, such 'emancipatory' action research is, like Elliott's 'educational' process, necessarily collaborative.

Carr, Kemmis and Elliott leave little doubt as to which kind of action research they value most. But they are not without critics. Whitehead and Lomax (1987) objected strongly to the proposal that action research could be 'subsumed by traditionally competing social science paradigms' (p.178), claiming that, 'educational action research is an educational way of understanding education, with its own distinctive educational values underpinning it.' (p.178). Whitehead's conception of action research locates the heart of the process very firmly with the individual, proposing that each participant is involved in the formation of her own '**living theory**' (Whitehead 1985) out of the dialectical reality of her practice.

Jennings and Graham (1996) emphasise the individual perspective further by applying a **postmodern critique** to the framework of technical, practical and empowering action research. Locating their argument in the work of Foucault (1980) and Lyotard (1984), they reject the notion of emancipation as defined in 'critical' action research, suggesting that the postmodern interpretation of the relationship between truth and power means that 'knowledge is based on nothing more than a number of diverse discourses, each with its own rules and structures, with no discourse being privileged' (Jennings and Graham, 1996, p. 273). They suggest that whilst there has been 'a concern among educators to define action research in more precise terms', it is possible that 'a static definition is neither feasible nor appropriate in a postmodern world' (p.276).

4 A 'bottom line'

Although there are many characterisations of the process of action research, there can be seen to be certain common elements within them. These common elements can be thought of as constituting a 'bottom line' in any definition of action research:

- Action research is about teachers striving to understand and to improve their practice. At the 'bottom line', this operates at a personal level. It may lead on to collaboration and a critique of the situation in which the practice is carried out, but this does not have to be a fundamental aim.
- Action research proceeds through a process of planning, action and reflection upon action. This can be thought of as an action-reflection 'cycle'.
- Action research involves the gathering of evidence about practice.
- Action research involves teachers trying to see the effects of planned change in their practice.

- Action research strives to be systematic and rigorous.
- Analysis and knowledge formation in action research belong to the practitioner.

[Back to Top](#)

PART THREE

DOING ACTION RESEARCH

1 Starting

Some key questions:

Barrett and Whitehead (1985) ask six questions which should help you start your inquiry:

1. What is your concern?
2. Why are you concerned?
3. What do you think you could do about it?
4. What kind of evidence could you collect to help you make some judgement about what is happening?
5. How would you collect such evidence?
6. How would you check that your judgement about what has happened is reasonable, fair and accurate?

What can I investigate through action research?

Action research can be used to investigate practical, everyday issues:

- 'Action research investigates everyday problems experienced by teachers' (Elliott, 1981).
- 'All you need is a general idea that something might be *improved*' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1982).
- 'I experience a problem when some of my educational values are negated in my practice' (Whitehead 1985).

Starting points might be of the following kinds:

1. I want to get better at my science teaching...
2. I'm not sure why my students don't engage in discussion...
3. I have to implement the speaking and listening guidelines, but I'm not sure what is the best way...
4. How can we make staff meetings more productive?....
5. I've seen something working well in school X; I wonder if it would work for me?...
6. Is there anything we can do about our poor take-up of A level mathematics?...
7. How can I promote more use of computers in the Humanities?...

8. I wonder if I'm too focused on recording with my six year olds?...

It is important to choose an area that you can do something about. Some questions are not amenable to action research:

- Is there any relationship between single-parent families and attendance?
- Are tall children better at pole-vaulting?
- Does ethnicity affect performance in SATs?

Remember that it is the 'strategic action' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982) that you can employ to try to solve the problem that will give you the insights into the factors affecting your practice.

- Jot down some preliminary ideas regarding possibilities for an action research project relating to your own practice.
- Highlight those which might be the most feasible.

2 Focusing on a topic

Golden rules for selecting a topic

- Keep it manageable – keep the focus small scale.
- It should be interesting to you – you may need some perseverance to see the inquiry through!
- It should be workable – you are not stumped for ideas, but can identify ways in which you might have a go at addressing your question.
- It is not too disruptive of normal routines. (Important here to think not just of your own, but others' that your actions might affect).

Reconnaissance

Once you have mapped out the general area of concern, you will need to focus specifically on something you can do something about. There may be many potential starting points within your inquiry; in a way, it doesn't matter where you start, as long as you consider that the action may be beneficial. In order to get to this point, however, you may need to spend sometime looking at your practice in a little detail, noting the various aspects which might be changed. This period of focusing is known as 'reconnaissance'.

Writing

During this time, you may also employ other strategies to help you refine your focus. Winter (1989) suggests a range of writing strategies that may help you:

- brainstorming ideas – looking for patterns, recurring ideas;
- keeping an interest log/diary;
- writing a letter about your concern to someone (no need to post it!);
- writing a story about the situation – stories are a reflexive statement, in which you may express ambiguities and contradictions (they will need analysing – this is best

done in the presence of [a critical friend](#) – see below).

Whichever method you employ, writing is frequently the most powerful way for helping you make sense of a situation. It allows you to work through ideas and explore possibilities and 'maybes'.

Remember, the point of all of this is to help you clarify the issue and decide what your first change in action is going to be.

- Practise Winter's technique. Write a letter to someone (real or imaginary) about a specific issue. Analyse your writing for patterns in the way you express the issue, ambiguities in what you say or concerns that you raise. Make a separate note of these.
- Do they help you to focus your thinking?

A critical friend

It helps to talk over the issue with a 'critical friend': someone who can help you focus without giving you answers of his / her own. If someone agrees to act as your critical friend, it is worth spending a little time at the beginning of the relationship to work out how you will work together. Being a critical friend is a commitment and a responsibility; it is not an excuse for a colleague to give you their 'fourpenn'orth'. Some key rules for the critical friend which might prove helpful:

- Try only to pose questions; don't give accounts of similar experiences.
- Don't make critical remarks that will put pressure on your colleague to defend him/herself. The critical element in critical friendship should lie in the action researcher, not you!
- Don't offer your own solutions to the problem. It is for the researcher to work these out for him/herself.
- Ask for concrete experiences and examples to help illustrate a problem.
- Ask for reasons and motives for actions.
- Widen the discussion by asking if other possible factors not analysed yet might be of influence.

(after Ainscow and Conner, 1990)

3 Planning what you will do

Your reconnaissance and your critical friend will help you to focus on an issue. Once you have done this, you will need to plan how you are going to carry out the inquiry. This planning will also help you refine what you're looking at. Some further key questions to ask yourself:

- Can anyone help provide the relevant information / data for your inquiry?

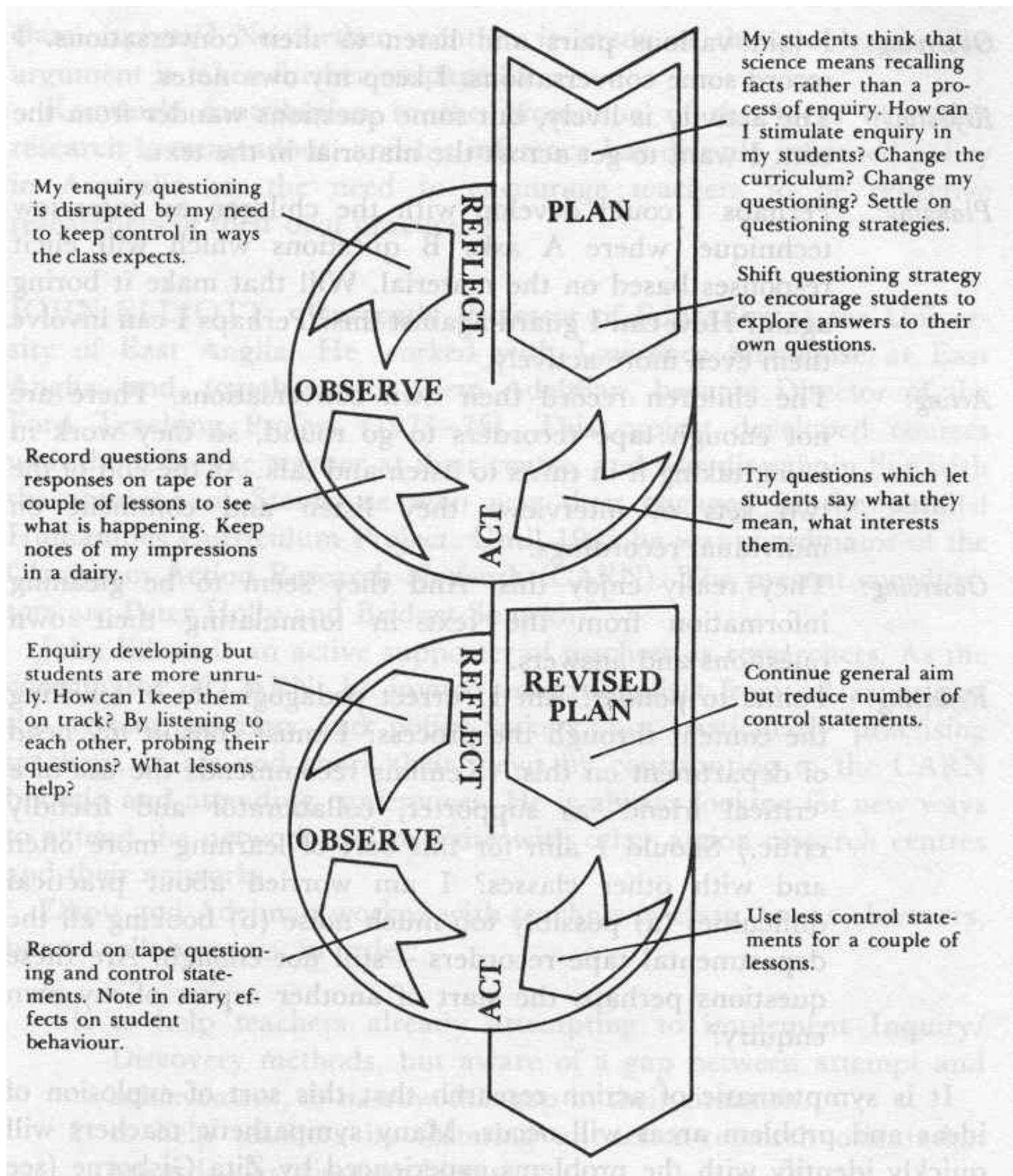
- To whom or what do you need access?
- Is it feasible to get this access?
- How much time do you have?
- How will you divide up the time that you have?

Strategic action

Once you have answered all these questions, you will be in a position to decide on what action you are going to take as a first stab at tackling your concern. Don't worry about this action – many people feel concerned about getting their action right, trying to solve their problem immediately. The result is that they become 'frozen', not able to act at all! All that matters is that you try to do something that *might* help you in that situation. It should be 'strategic action' - action towards an identified end - but there is *no way of knowing* whether it will be right before you carry it out. The likelihood is that it will address some aspects of the problem, but that it will raise other issues you hadn't anticipated.

- **Remember:** This is the whole point! This is when the action becomes part of research itself. So just have a go!

McNiff (1988, p 27) gives an example using the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) to illustrate this aspect:



4 Monitoring

However, you can't be *too* cavalier about it – you have to anticipate how you will gather information regarding the impact of your action. As we saw in Part One, you should plan

to use more than one means of data gathering to ensure [triangulation](#). This can be difficult in a busy classroom, so be realistic. Again, as you start to explore different methods of data gathering, you will become more familiar with them and be able to use them more efficiently. Practice doesn't make perfect, but it certainly helps! Remember that some data can be gathered after the event, through, for example, interview or questionnaire; you don't have to gather *everything* as you are acting.

Choosing methods

We have already identified that action researchers can use any method of data gathering, as long as they think it will give them useful and reliable evidence of the impact of their action (see [Part One](#)). Some important considerations to bear in mind:

- Does the method give a form of data which relates to my question?
- Is it feasible in the available time?
- Have I made myself aware of its strengths and limitations?
- Will it be an acceptable method for the other people involved?
- Will it disrupt normal routines? (If the data gathering method presents as much change as the planned action, then how will I know what is having an effect?!)

Ethical considerations

Any research which involves other people in some way has ethical implications. Action research in education is deeply embedded in the social world of the school or college within which it takes place. Because education is a social action, data gathering and analysis within action research will inevitably impact on the lives of others in those institutions, be they pupils, students or colleagues. The University of Plymouth produces guidelines for research involving human participants (click [here](#) to see them) and everyone organising such research is required to complete an ethical protocol. Although you may protest that your action research is focused merely on the social world of your own classroom, the open, fluid nature of the research process makes it important that you produce a protocol that will apply to any situation that may arise. In any case, remember that the children or students in your class are worthy of the same consideration as adults and fellow professionals. The object of the protocol is to ensure individual rights are not infringed and to promote fairness in the interpretation of data.

5 Analysis

Analysis in action research is the spur to reflection and the planning of new action. Analysis within action research is about possibilities, not certainties. It is not about why things have to be as they are, but rather what possibilities for change lie within a situation. Action within a complex social world is not static; it is dynamic and forever evolving.

In analysing your action research, you need to adopt an approach which can help uncover this dynamic nature. To understand his or her practice, an action researcher should strive to uncover the elements that constitute it; elements which may be in harmony or in contradiction. Action researchers need to look at their practice *dialectically*.

Perhaps the most lucid overview of dialectics and its application to analysis within action research is provided by Winter (1989, pp 46-55). **I strongly urge you to read this.** Dialectics represents both a theory of reality itself and a way of understanding it. Within a dialectical perspective, nothing stands alone; there is no such thing as a simple unity. Any phenomenon, be it an object, a person, a practice or a social situation, is only understood by taking account of the sets of relationships which comprise it: the relationship between the elements of which the phenomenon is constituted and the relationship between the phenomenon and the context within which it exists. At the heart of this perspective, therefore, lies a contradiction: a phenomenon is a thing, yet it is also many things. A book is a book, yet it is also made up of words, paper, pages and cover and it gains meaning as a book because it is a book amongst other books of the same kind, within the milieu of ideas which inform them. A class is an entity, yet it is made of a teacher and individual children and it lies within a school and the political structures which govern them.

The word dialectics comes from a Greek root meaning the art of discussion. To understand a phenomenon dialectically involves the exploration of these relationships. The elements are interdependent in that they form the unity of the phenomenon, but individually they are different and thus potentially in opposition. The teacher teaches her class in the school, but the children's interests will be different from hers and her educational values may clash with those of school policy. There are contradictions within the unity of the phenomenon of her teaching. Because of these contradictions, her teaching has the continual potential for change. Analysing her teaching dialectically will help to highlight those contradictions and suggest from among the great number that can be identified those relationships which might be significant.

Progress in action research can be seen to depend on this kind of analysis. In striving to understand her teaching, the teacher will need to explore the elements which constitute it. Action, reflection and planning proceed through the teacher identifying the contradictory aspects that may be preventing her from achieving what she wants in her teaching. The analysis will feed into new (hopefully improved) teaching and it will also feed into an understanding of why her teaching is as it is. Ideas and action are not separate, they are both constitutive elements of the phenomenon of her teaching. Action research should promote analysis which determines whether they are in accord with each other or whether there is contradiction between them. A propositional representation of theory and practice, as if they exist as separate unities, fails to reflect this essentially dynamic relationship between the two. Theory is practice, for understanding is one element that makes the teacher's action what it is.

To summarise a dialectical approach to analysis:

When considering a phenomenon dialectically, we identify within it the set of relationships which define it, rather than trying to think of it as a single entity. These are:

- a. the set of relationships which relate the phenomenon to the context within which it has its form - a little like the concentric rings of an onion;
- b. the set of relationships between the elements of which the phenomenon consists - how it is one and many at the same time;

Dialectics therefore proposes:

- a phenomenon is a set of relations which are different (contradictory) and interdependent (forming a unity);
- this leads to an instability which gives it an inherent tendency to change.

A dialectical analysis seeks to identify these different elements within practice and look for those aspects where the contradictory elements might threaten the stability of the whole. For example, children's attitudes to each other might threaten your class groupings or the cohesion of your teaching may be threatened by the newly imposed modular structure of the programme within which you have to work. No matter how much you try to get your teaching 'right', it won't feel right unless you take these other aspects into consideration. With each new action you take, you will be exploring both how your existing problem or question can be resolved but also understanding a little more about your practice. Again, McNiff's representation gives a good idea of what this might feel like ([see above](#)).

[Back to Top](#)

PART FOUR

LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISMS OF ACTION RESEARCH

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• After reflecting on the first three parts of this component, in what ways might one criticise the process of action research? |
|---|

Some thoughts:

1 Lack of time

Action researchers work in the hurly burly of their own practice. Monitoring closely this practice as they are acting within it demands space and time which, almost by definition, the practice does not give easily. It is therefore difficult to maintain rigour in data gathering and critique.

2 Validity as research

Action research is carried out by individuals who are interested parties in the research. This fact has led to criticisms of the validity of the research process, with accusations of inevitable researcher bias in data gathering and analysis. The justification for action research counters this criticism by suggesting that it is impossible to access practice

without involving the practitioner. Practice is action informed by values and aims which are not fully accessible from the outside. The practitioner may not even be wholly aware of the meaning of his or her values until he or she tries to embody them in her action.

3 Unfamiliarity with research methods

Action researchers frequently explore what may constitute adequate research methods at the same time as they are researching their practice. This kind of 'on the job' training and consequent *ad hoc* planning, has led to accusations of unreliability in data gathering. To some extent, this unreliability is inevitable, but the notion only makes sense in the presence of verifiably reliable data gathering. From this perspective, action research would claim that, flawed or not, the process provides the most reliable access to practice.

Action researchers draw attention to the notion of commitment. An action researcher must be committed to rigorous examination and critique of his or her practice. Carr and Kemmis (1986) liken this conceptualisation of commitment to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* - 'the disposition to act truly and rightly'. This is the only fixed element, all else might change. Action researchers should involve outsiders (for example a critical friend) in the analysis of their data, but it is the degree to which action researchers are committed to this critical analysis of their practice that provides the true measure of reliability in data gathering.

This, however, is a difficult principle. Commitment cannot be measured easily and the process will continue to be criticised because of this. How do we know that an action researcher's analysis is rigorous enough?

- Close examination of this issue raises very profound epistemological questions regarding the nature of knowledge itself. Is there such a thing as objective knowledge of practice, or is it always an individual's personal construct?
- Record your thoughts.

4 Action research produces results which are not generalisable

This is true, but someone else's ideas or conclusions can always be tried out by other persons in their own practice, to see if they work for them (c.f. Hamilton (1981) in Part One).

5 Representations of the process of action research may confuse, rather than enlighten

The range of visual diagrams of the action research process are of varying complexity and, perhaps, not always helpful:

- They can give a false sense of regularity to the teacher. McNiff (1988) has pointed out that action research is a messy process (see [above](#)), with forays into territory only partially related to the main focus of study, aborted lines of inquiry and continual refocusing. Hopkins (1993) criticises the tight, orderly representations of Elliott, Ebbutt and McKernan as having the potential to 'trap teachers within a framework which they might come to depend on and which will, consequently, inhibit independent action' (pp.54-55).
- The representations may be unduly complex. Ebbutt (1985) criticised Elliott's diagram as 'leading to mystification'.

6 The rhetoric of action research may be confusing, or in contradiction with the main principles of the process.

A brief glance at Carr and Kemmis (1986) or Winter (1987) will show that behind a straightforward strategy for professionals to examine systematically the nature of their practice, there is an intense methodological and epistemological debate. The fact that the outcome of this debate seems always to show that action research is the 'right' way to research practice, has been the subject of notable criticisms, both from outside and within. For example:

- Gibson (1985), in perhaps the most trenchant critique of the literature of the time, suggested that action research tended towards the heavily ironic situation of little self-critique. He raged against what he saw as the hubris of Carr and Kemmis (1986), at one point likening the action research movement to the Salvation Army.
- Lewis (1987) criticised the tendency to prescribe to teachers, claiming that he found little evidence of Carr and Kemmis' 'familiarity with the practical world of teachers and the real problems which teachers face' (p 100).
- Whitehead and Lomax (1987) also criticised the level of prescription in some elements of the literature. In particular, they attacked Elliott's, along with Carr and Kemmis', categorisation of action research into various kinds - technical, practical and emancipatory. These are supposed to reflect the levels of involvement of participants, the amount of critique possible and, consequently, the quality of the knowledge derived from the process. For action research to be emancipatory, the argument goes, it must, for a start, be collaborative. Whitehead and Lomax (1987) claimed that this rhetoric is far too prescriptive. A hierarchy of action research styles suggests that it is possible to judge the quality of teachers' research even before it has taken place. This criticism has also been made by Somekh (1988). (It is worth suggesting, however, that Whitehead and Lomax might also have seen their model of action research as the right one....)
- Zeichner (1993) sums up the relevance of these distinctions and debates to teachers thus:

When I use the term 'action research', I am using it in a very broad sense as a systematic inquiry by practitioners about their own practices. There has been a lot of debate in the literature about what

is and is not real action research, about the specifics of the action research spiral, about whether action research must be collaborative or not, about whether it can or should involve outsiders as well as insiders, and so on...a lot of this discourse, although highly informative in an academic sense, is essentially irrelevant to many of those who actually engage in action research...

There are many different cultures of action research and it seems to me that an awful lot of time and energy is wasted in arguing over who are the 'real' action researchers and who are the imposters...

(pp.200-201)

[Back to Top](#)

PART FIVE

TASKS

NB Only for those University of Plymouth students undertaking the 'Research in Education' module as part of the preparation for the submission of a MA dissertation proposal

Tasks, once completed, should be sent to resined@plymouth.ac.uk, making clear:

- which **component** it is from;
- which **task** it is (B or C);
- the name of your dissertation **supervisor**.

It will then be passed on to the component leader (and copied to your supervisor). The component leader will get back to you with comments and advice which we hope will be educative and which will help you in preparing your dissertation proposal once you are ready. (Remember that these tasks are formative and that it is the proposal which forms the summative assessment for the MERS501 (resined) module.) This email address is checked daily so please use it for all correspondence about RESINED other than that directed to particular individuals for specific reasons.

TASK B (DATA COLLECTION)

- From an identified 'action', plan how you are going to monitor the effects of your change in practice. Consider how you will ensure that you are rigorous in your approach. See the discussion above ([Part One](#) and [Part Three](#)) and consult the recommended texts (see [below](#)).

TASK C (DATA ANALYSIS)

- Conduct a dialectical analysis (see Winter 1989 and parts [Two](#) and [Three](#) above) on a [practice-related](#) issue deriving from your [experience](#) or your study.

FURTHER QUESTIONS THAT YOU MIGHT WANT TO CONSIDER IN RELATION THE NATURE OF ACTION RESEARCH

Is action research really 'research'?

Discuss with reference to the points made above (see [Part Two](#) and [Part Four](#)) and to recommended texts (see [below](#)), especially Gibson (1985). I suggest you have a look at the articles in the journal *Educational Action Research*, which is available electronically via the University of Plymouth portal. A free sample copy can be obtained at:

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09650792.asp>

In particular, see the article by Richard Winter, 'Managers, Spectators and Citizens: where does 'theory' come from in action research?' in *Educational Action Research* Vol 6, No 3, 1998, which can be accessed by clicking [here](#).

What counts as collaboration in action research?

Discuss with reference to your own experience and to Parts [Two](#), [Three](#) and [Four](#) above.

What counts as action research?

In the light of your reading of this component, view the Teachers TV video clip to be found at: <http://www.teachers.tv/video/4883> which purports to show examples of action research in schools.

Consider the extent to which the examples shown in the clip constitute action research.

[Back to Top](#)

PART SIX

FURTHER READING

Books, book chapters & articles (those strongly recommended in **bold**)

Altricher, H., Posch, P. & Somekh, B. (1993) *Teachers Investigate their Work: An Introduction to the Methods of Action Research*, London, Routledge.

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and action research*. Lewes, Falmer.

Cohen, L ; Manion, L & Morrison, K (2000) *Research Methods in Education* (5th edition), London, RoutledgeFalmer

Corey, S. (1953) *Action Research to Improve School Practices*. New York, Columbia University, Teachers College Press.

Ebbutt, D. (1985) *Educational Action research: some general concerns and specific quibbles*, in: Burgess, R. (ed.) *Issues in Educational Research: qualitative methods*. Lewes, Falmer.

Elliott, J. (1981) *Action research: a framework for self-evaluation in schools*. TIQL working paper no.1., Cambridge, Cambridge Institute of Education.

Elliott, J. (1991) *Action Research for Educational Change*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

Foucault, M. (1980) *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton, Harvester.

Gibson, R. (1985) Critical times for action research. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 15 (1): 59-64.

Hamilton, D. (1981) Generalization in the Educational Sciences: problems and purposes. In: Popkewitz, T.S. and Tabachnik, B.R. (eds.) *The Study of Schooling: field based methodologies in educational research and evaluation*, New York, Praeger.

Hollingsworth, S. (ed.) (1997) *International Action Research: a casebook for educational reform*. London, Falmer.

Hollingsworth, S., Noffke, S.E., Walker, M. & Winter, R. (1997) Epilogue: What have we learned from these case on action research and educational reform? in: Hollingsworth, S. (ed.) *International Action Research: a casebook for educational reform*, London, Falmer.

Hopkins, D. (1993) *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research*, 2nd edition, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.

Hustler, D., Cassidy, A. & Cuff, E. (eds.) (1986) *Action Research in Classrooms and Schools*, London, Allen and Unwin.

Jennings, L. & Graham, A. (1996) Postmodern perspectives and action research: reflecting on the possibilities. *Educational Action Research*, 4 (2): 267-278.

Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (1982) *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria, Deakin University Press.

Koshy, V. (2005) Action research for improving practice. A practical guide. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Lewin, K. (1948) *Resolving Social Conflicts*. New York, Harper.

Lewis, I. (1987) Encouraging reflexive teacher research. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 8 (1): 95-105.

Lyotard, J.F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

McKernan (1991) *Curriculum Action research: a handbook of methods and resources for the reflective practitioner*. London, Kogan Page.

McNiff, J. (1988) *Action Research: Principles and Practice*, Basingstoke, Macmillan.

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York, Basic Books.

Somekh, B. (1988) The role of action research in collaborative inquiry and school improvement. Paper to CARN conference, Cambridge, 25-27 March.

Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*. London, Heinemann.

Taba, H. (1962) *Curriculum Development: theory and practice*. New York, Harcourt, Brace and World.

Wallace, M. (1987) A historical review of action research: some implications for the education of teachers in their managerial role. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 13 (2): 97-115

Whitehead, J. (1985) *An Analysis of an Individual's Educational Development: the basis for personally oriented action research*, in: Shipman, M. (ed.) *Educational Research: principles, policies and practices*, Lewes, Falmer.

Whitehead, J. (1989) Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind 'How do I improve my practice?' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19 (1): 41-52

Whitehead, J. & Lomax, P. (1987) Action research and the politics of educational knowledge. *British Educational Research Journal*, 13 (2): 175-190.

Winter, R. (1987) *Action Research and the Nature of Social Inquiry*. Aldershot, Gower.

Winter, R. (1989) *Learning from Experience: principles and practice in action research*. Lewes, Falmer.

Woods, P. (1996) *Researching the Art of Teaching: ethnography for educational use*. London, Routledge.

Zeichner, K.M. (1993) Action research: personal renewal and social reconstruction. *Educational Action Research*, 1 (2): 199-219.

Websites

<http://www.open.ac.uk/cobe/docs/AR-Guide-final.pdf>

This site presents training material for Open University Associate Lecturers. It deals with key theoretical and practical aspects of action research and would be particularly useful for tutors in FE or HE who were thinking of undertaking research into their own practice. There are examples of past projects, highlighting procedural stages and outcomes.

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw/>

Jack Whitehead's website at Bath University. Contains much information regarding the process of action research, along with a selection of extracts from theses that have used action research as their methodology.

<http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/carn/>

The Collaborative Action Research Network site at Manchester Metropolitan University. A vast amount of information about action research in education. Follows the developmental work in the Ford Teaching Project (1976), pioneered by Lawrence Stenhouse. Also has conference proceedings, publications, newsletters and links to other sites.

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09650792.asp>

The website for the journal *Educational Action Research*. Now nearly ten years old, the journal contains written accounts of a wide range of action research projects, as well as theoretical debate.

[Back to Top](#)

[Beginning Research](#) | [Action Research](#) | [Case Study](#) | [Interviews](#) | [Observation Techniques](#)
| [Education Research in the Postmodern](#)

[Evaluation Research in Education](#) | [Narrative](#) | [Presentations](#) | [Qualitative Research](#) |
[Quantitative Methods](#) | [Questionnaires](#) | [Writing up Research](#)

[Home](#)

