

PAPER
41

Action and research (2)

Bob Dick (2002) Action research: action and research. A paper prepared for the seminar "Doing good action research" held at Southern Cross University, Monday February 18, 2002. ¹

Action research is a flexible spiral process which allows action (change, improvement) and research (understanding, knowledge) to be achieved at the same time. The understanding allows more informed change and at the same time is informed by that change. People affected by the change are usually involved in the action research. This allows the understanding to be widely shared and the change to be pursued with commitment.

1. Copyright © Bob Dick 2002. This document may be copied if it is not included in material sold at a profit, and if this notice is shown

What is action research? —

It's a natural way of acting and researching at the same time

With the exception of well-practised tasks there is a natural rhythm to the way most of us behave. We do something. We check if it worked as expected. If it didn't, we analyse what happened and what we might do differently. If necessary we repeat the process.

act → review → act → review ...

This is the natural cycle which action research uses to achieve its twin outcomes of action (for example, change) and research (for example, understanding). You might say that action research is true to label — it is action and research.

action research = action and research

Some features of action research assist the action. Some assist the research. Some assist the “and” — they help the action and the research fit together. We'll explore these in turn.

How does action research achieve the action outcomes? —

Mostly by involving people in the planning and the action and by being flexible and responsive to situation and people

In many situations some people (managers, teachers, parents) decide what is to be done. Others (employees, pupils, children) are then expected to do it. The deciders and the doers are different people. This often results in a certain lack of enthusiasm on the part of the doers.

In contrast, action research seeks to remove the gap between deciders and doers. Those who are affected by the decision join those who will carry it out. Together they decide what is to be done. Done well, participation generates commitment.

Further, wider views of the situation can then be taken into account. Managers do not always understand their employees, nor teachers their pupils, nor parents their children. Done well, participation can provide more complete information.

In addition, action research provides a flexibility which suits it well to changing situations. It achieves its flexibility mostly from its cyclic or spiral process. We'll come to that later. First, consider its pursuit of research outcomes.

How does action research achieve the research outcomes? —

Mostly by following action with critical reflection

When action research is explained to people they often respond “Oh, I do that already”. And to some extent they do. It *is* natural to act and then review the results of the action. Much of the time, however, many of us do not reflect as regularly or as critically or as systematically as we might.

With regular, critical and systematic reflection we can have more confidence in our research conclusions. Without it we may overlook some important evidence. In particular, it seems to be uncommon for people to pay a lot of attention to evidence which doesn't fit in with what they expect or assume.

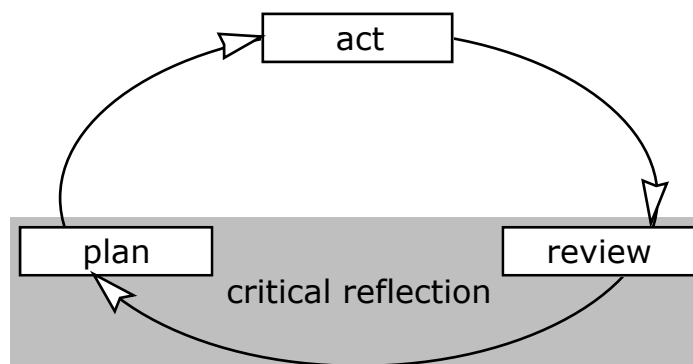
In action research people are encouraged to seek out *disconfirming* evidence — evidence which doesn't match what they expect or assume.

How does action research fit action and research together? —

Mostly by alternating between them in a tight cycle

In each cycle there is action and critical reflection. During reflection people first examine what happened previously — they “review”. They then decide what to do next — they “plan”.

So action is followed by critical reflection: What worked? What didn't? What



have we learned? How might we do it differently next time?

Reflection is followed by action. The understanding achieved, the conclusions drawn, the plans developed ... These are tested in action.

How are participants able to contribute to action research? —

Mostly through using natural processes and qualitative data

Words are the common currency of much discussion. Words tend to produce qualitative information. So that it is accessible to participants, therefore, action research tends to be qualitative.

If numbers can be used they do offer advantages. In field settings, though, one often has to make other sacrifices to be able to use numbers. In particular, doing

quantitative research often requires omitting anything you can't easily attach numbers to. Some quantitative action research is done; most, however, is qualitative.

How is action research able to be flexible yet rigorous? —

Mostly through a cyclic process which includes critical reflection

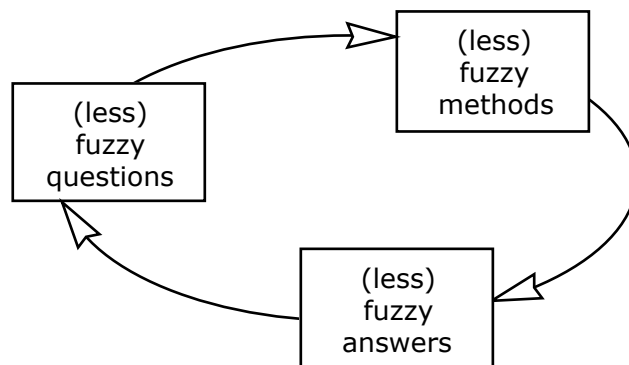
A cyclic process can be flexible and responsive. You don't have to design the research in detail before you start. Instead, you can refine your research design as you learn more about the situation you are researching. The design gets better, fits the situation better, as you proceed.

Here, qualitative methods also help. You don't have to invest early time and effort into developing measures which may or may not prove relevant later.

An action research study can begin with quite imprecise research questions. Yes, imprecise questions and methods can be expected to yield imprecise answers initially. Those imprecise answers can help to refine questions and methods. Each cycle can be a step in the direction of better action and better research.

In other words, there are times when the initial use of imprecise methods to answer imprecise questions is an appropriate choice. Action research provides enough flexibility to allow imprecise beginnings while progressing towards appropriate endings. A cyclic process gives more chances to learn from experience. Qualitative information is less constraining of the process.

You might therefore describe action research as beginning with fuzzy questions and methods and answers. All that is required is that with each cycle they become more precise.



Where does the rigour come from? —

Mostly through regular critical reflection tested in action

In fact, there are several qualities of action research which allow it to pursue rigorous understanding:

- The involvement of all interested parties provides more information about the situation
- Critical reflection in each cycle provides many chances to correct errors. This is especially so when there are cycles within cycles within cycles, and where the critical reflection is characterised by a vigorous search for disconfirming evidence
- Within each cycle the assumptions underlying the plans are tested in action.

When would you use action research? —

When you wish to achieve understanding and change at the same time

As the description above reveals, most action research is cyclic or spiral. It alternates between action and critical reflection as it moves forward. The reflection

begins with critical review of the situation and of past actions. It is followed by informed planning of the next action.

There are cycles within cycles within cycles. Some extend across an entire study. Others occupy only minutes or less. The result can be a very flexible and responsive process. When each cycle includes a vigorous seeking out of disconfirming evidence the flexibility is also accompanied by research rigour.

The people affected by the change are involved in the action and the critical reflection. Understanding is widely shared, and so is commitment to any planned change.

Action research certainly isn't the only research process. It isn't even the only process for researching change. However, it is a process well suited to situations where you wish to achieve change (the "action") and understanding (the "research") at the same time.
