

Bob Dick

My early training was as an experimental psychologist. I wasn't given even a hint of the existence of action research. My own early research was done in a laboratory using experimental methods. If I were still asking the same research questions I was trying to answer then, that's what I'd still do.

Then, quite by accident, I became an educator and a practitioner. The research methods I knew well didn't fit my new situation. Either I found something else or I abandoned research altogether.

Some colleagues mentioned something called action research. Others tried to dissuade me from even looking at it. "Not much action, and not much research" was how one of them characterised it. That was reason enough to examine it for myself.

I discovered a research methodology which formalised and improved on what many good practitioners do. They reflect on their experience. They learn from it. They apply that learning to improve their practice.

I liked the flexibility and responsiveness it brought to the research situation. That suited it to research on the practice of education and change management, both of them performing arts in many respects.

I also liked the commitment to involving those who were the object of the research as colleagues. This fitted in with my own preferences, and those of my new fields of community and organisational change.

When I began to build regular monitoring and reflection into my university classes they began to improve noticeably. This explains one of my interests in action research -- how to increase further its flexibility and responsiveness. As my educational skills improved so did my action research. As my action research was refined, so were my educational skills.

My natural classroom style is involving, experiential and democratic. In this situation action research was a natural choice for methodology.

My other interest was in how to improve the rigour. For all of this time I have continued to work in a psychology school within traditional universities. Action research has continued to be regarded as highly suspect. Colleagues mostly left me alone to do what I wished within the classroom.

Thesis supervision was a different matter. In a thesis or dissertation anything which couldn't be argued for, on evidential or logical grounds, wouldn't do. The

action research literature was surprisingly little help. It contained more ideology than reason, and would have been quite unpersuasive to my colleagues.

In recent times I have been supervising theses by senior managers researching their own practice. In almost all instances they have been able to achieve multiple outcomes. They improve as managers. They bring about substantial improvements for their organisations. They earn a PhD.

Despite their usually-demanding jobs, because they are researching their own practice they often complete in close to minimum time. I don't know of any other research methodology which would give them the same outcomes as effectively.

My present position is that with an appropriate methodology, rigour and relevance can support each other. The spiral nature of action research allows this to happen.

That said, I'm not an evangelist for action research. To my mind the disputes between different research approaches serve no useful purpose. The sectarian disputes within action research serve even less.

In my view good research is research which achieves the research purpose in the research situation. When the requirement is for participation, flexibility and responsiveness, with rigour, action research still seems to me to be the most obvious choice.