

Action Research and Professional Growth

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Abstract

In this presentation, I will make a case for action research as a powerful professional development tool: one that can empower teachers to take control of their own professional development. I will begin by looking at the concept of action research: what it is and how it evolved in education in general, and language education in particular. In the next part of the paper, I will focus on practicalities, looking at the steps in the action research process, as well as how to go about collecting, analyzing and presenting data. I will then present the results of a study I conducted which investigated the effect on teachers' attitudes and teaching practices as a result of being involved in action research. In the final part of the presentation, I will draw on my experiences as a consultant to two action research networks in looking at some of the problems that can occur in doing action research and some of the steps that can be taken to avoid these problems.

What is action research?

The concept of action research is generally attributed to the father of social psychology, Kurt Lewin, who wrote about it in the 1940s (see Lewin, 1948, 1951). It was later taken up by educators, who saw it as a means by which teachers could take control of their own professional destinies. Carr and Kemmis, two of the leading advocates of educational action research, wrote:

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of those practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Carr and Kemmis 1986: 162).

This is a widely cited, but rather ideologically loaded definition. It highlights the practitioner driven nature of action research as well as the social justice bias, bequeathed to the concept by Lewin, a left-wing sociologist. However, it is rather too broad and programmatic to work as a definition for a form of research, being little more than a statement of reflective teaching (see, for example, Richards and Lockhart 1994). For me the key difference between reflective practice and research is that the results of the process, the outcomes or products, must be published. I am using 'publish' here in its original sense: to make publicly available to others for critical scrutiny. (This may involve a print publication, but it could just as easily be a presentation at a teachers' conference or an inservice day.)

A more inclusive definition is provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982: 5) who suggest that

The linking of the terms 'action' and 'research' highlights the essential feature of the method: trying out ideas in practice as a means of improvement and as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning. The result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school, and better articulation and justification of the educational rationale of what goes on. Action research provides a way of working which links theory and practice into the one whole: ideas-in-action.

In this quote, the authors highlight the links between ideas (or ‘theory’) and practice. They also point out that action research entails more than simply providing descriptive and interpretive accounts of the classroom, no matter how rich these might be. Action research is meant to lead to change and improvement in what happens in the classroom.

They go on to assert that:

A distinctive feature of action research is that those affected by planned changes have the primary responsibility for deciding on courses of critically informed action which seems likely to lead to improvement, and for evaluating the results of strategies tried out in practice. *Action research is a group activity.* (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 6).

In summary, then according to Kemmis and McTaggart, educational action research is carried out by classroom practitioners;
is collaborative in nature; and
is aimed at bringing about change.

I believe that action research has all of the characteristics of ‘regular’ research. In other words, it will contain research questions, data that have relevant bearing on the questions, analysis and interpretation of the data, and some form of publication. I agree that it is the centrality of the classroom practitioner as a prime mover in the action research process that defines the approach and differentiates it from other forms of research. I also agree that it should be aimed at bringing about change rather than simple documenting ‘what is going on’. However, I think that Kemmis and McTaggart go too far in their assertion that in order to qualify as action research, the process must be a group activity: that is, that it must be collaborative. Certainly, collaboration is highly desirable. However, to assert that without collaboration it cannot be called action research is unrealistic. Many practitioners would dearly love to collaborate, but are simply not in a position to do so.

What are the steps in doing Action Research?

Most writers on action research agree that it is a cyclical rather than a ‘one shot’ process. In other words, two or more research cycles are usually required in order to resolve the problem or puzzle that initiated the research. These cycles are listed and exemplified in Table 1, below.

Table 1: The action research cycle

Cycle	Example
Cycle 1	
Step 1: Problem/puzzle identification	“Student motivation is declining over the course of the semester.”
Step: Preliminary investigation	“Interviews with students confirm my suspicion.”
Step 3: Hypothesis formation	“Students do not feel they are making progress from their efforts. Learning logs will provide evidence to learners of progress.”
Step 4: Plan intervention	“Get students to complete learning logs each week.”

Step 5: Initiate action and observe outcomes: “Motivation is improving, but not as rapidly as desired.”

Cycle 2

Step 6: Identification of follow-up puzzle: “How can I ensure more involvement and commitment by learners to their own learning process?”

Step 7: Second hypothesis: “Developing a reflective learning attitude on the part of learners will enhance involvement and motivation to learn.”

Step 8: Second round action and observation “At the end of each unit of work, learners complete a self-evaluation of learning progress and attainment of goals.”

The starting point in the cycle is usually some practice problem or puzzle that has to be confronted. Here is a narrative account of how I got started on a project, and what happened as a result.

It was my second semester at my new school, and I realized that things weren't working out the way I wanted. It was a speaking skills class, but my students just wouldn't open their mouths. The first semester had been the same. At that time, I had thought it was just a matter of my adjusting to a new situation. Now I knew it was something more serious. I decided to audiorecord my classes over several days. The recordings confirmed my observations. The tape was filled with the sound of my voice, punctuated by prolonged silences and the occasional monosyllabic student response. I consulted colleagues who said it was a “cultural thing”.

“So why have they enrolled in the class?” I asked.

“Well, they have no choice. Anyway, it isn't as if they don't want to be able to speak – it's a cultural thing. They want the magic language pill,” said one colleague.

So there was my challenge – and my dilemma: how to get my Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong students to speak English. After further thought and discussion, I decided to change the dynamics of the classroom, focusing more directly on group work, and encouraging students to speak through split information tasks [information gap tasks] in which the students *had* to speak English if the tasks were to be complete successfully.

I also tried to encourage students to redefine their own concept of what a classroom was [heretofore a place where the student sat silently while the teacher talked] by encouraging them to “break the rules.” On one desperate occasion, I asked a group of reluctant speakers to stand up and move about the classroom as they completed their task. Amazingly, once they had been liberated from their seats, they began to talk.

I make audio and video recordings of my class, which I reviewed from time to time, and was gratified to find a dramatic increase in the amount of student speech. However, I also noted that the distribution of student speech was uneven. Not all students were taking advantage of the opportunities to talk.

This new awareness led me into a second investigative cycle., focusing this time on the reluctant speakers in the class. I decided that these students were having difficulty redefining their roles, and concluded that if I added a learning strategy dimension with a focus on learner roles and responsibilities, it might help sensitize them to this very different kind of classroom. (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001: 133-134).

This narrative account illustrates a number of important points. Firstly, the researchable issue grew out of a practical problem that I was facing in my day to day work. Secondly, before I actually made changes to my teaching, I needed to collect some baseline data so that I had an objective record of what was going on. Thirdly, my initial intervention, although it was going in the right direction, revealed limitations and shortcomings. As a result, I needed to engage in a second round of data collection and analysis.

Doing the action research project also set off reverberations that went beyond the initial focus of my investigation. Although the focus of my attention was on the issue of learners' reticence to speak, other issues forced themselves into my consciousness. For example, I had to think about the cultural context in which my class took place, and the cultural appropriacy of what I was doing. As a result of the project I became much more sensitive to my students and their attitudes, views and needs. Also, as my students became more involved in their own learning process, and came to appreciate what I was trying to do and where I was 'coming from', they opened up to me. The result was a much richer experience for me as well as them. In the next section, I will look at this issue of the 'ripple effect' of action research on teachers' practice in general.

What effect can Action Research have on teachers' practices?

One of the strong claims of proponents of action research is that it leads to improvements in practice. In this section, I will look at some of the data that supports this contention, including data from my own research into the effects on practice of engaging in the action research process.

In evaluating a series of action research projects carried out by teachers in a French immersion program in British Columbia, Lewis (1992) identified three main payoffs.

1. Through the process of systematically implementing their own choice of action project based on the needs of the students in particular, each teacher learned more about their own theories, or frames for teaching, and modified these frames to a certain extent.
2. The frames for teaching of the participants in this study are related to the bigger questions of second language education and education in general. Practice cannot be understood thoroughly without appreciating how educational theory is expressed within teachers' frames and neither can theory be useful without recognizing that what counts is how theory becomes expressed within practice.
3. The 'teacher as researcher' or 'reflection in action' approach to teacher education can be a very powerful way of facilitating change in the curriculum

In the early 1990s, I was involved in working with a group of secondary school teachers who were involved in establishing an action research network. Although several teachers collaboratively investigated a particular issue (for example, implementing task-based teaching in their classrooms), most worked on individual projects. However, once a month they all met together for a half-day workshop to exchange ideas, share problems and generally give each other support. I was the facilitator at these half-day events. I also responded to individual teacher requests for assistance and advice when challenges arose between the monthly meetings.

Nunan (1993) documented changes made to classroom practice by this group of teachers as a result of being involved in action research. The results are summarized in table 1.

Table 1: Changes made to classroom practice as a result of taking part in action research.

What effect did involvement in the action research project have on your teaching practices overall?

Action	More	About the same	Less
tend to be directive	1	14	10
try to use a greater variety of behaviors	16	6	0
praise students	15	10	0
criticize students	0	11	13
am aware of students' feelings	18	6	0
give directions	4	16	5
am conscious of my non-verbal behavior	11	14	0
use the target language in class	19	6	0
am conscious of non-verbal cues of students	12	12	0
try to incorporate student ideas into my teaching	20	5	0
spend more class time talking myself	1	9	15
try to get my students working in groups	15	8	0
try to get divergent open-ended student responses	14	10	0
distinguish between enthusiasm and lack of order	9	15	0
try to get students to participate	18	7	0

Table 1 illustrates the positive effects that engagement in action research had on the practices of these teachers. The data reflect the 'ripple effect' that I referred to about.

Teachers not only solved specific problems in their classrooms, but doing action research also led to improvements in their classroom management and interaction.

What are some of the problems and solutions in doing Action Research?

Some time later, I acted as facilitator for other action research network. This time it was not with a group of ESL teachers, but with a group of high school LOTE (Languages other than English). teachers They taught a wide range of languages from Spanish and Italian through Vietnamese and Indonesian to Polish and Greek. This group kept diaries and journals of their experiences during the semester long project. In the next section I will summarize the problems and challenges that teachers reported through their journals.

Problems / challenges

One of the issues that I asked them to document was the challenges, problems and pitfalls that the encountered along the way. A content analysis of their records at the end of the semester revealed five major areas of concern as follows:

- Lack of time
- Lack of expertise
- Lack of ongoing support
- Fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher
- Fear of producing a public account of their research for a wider (unknown) audience.

Lack of time

Lack of time was the single biggest impediment to carrying out their action research. It was mentioned by every teacher in the network, and some teachers mentioned it virtually every time they made comments in their journals. Teachers are busy people, and involvement in the network, without removal of any of their other duties, added considerably to the burden of their daily professional life.

Lack of expertise

Not surprisingly, the second most frequently nominated roadblock on the road to success was 'lack of expertise'. The word *research* raises all sorts of fears and uncertainties in the minds of teachers. Research is what other people do. It conjures up images of scientists in white coats with measuring instruments and mysterious methods of carrying out statistical analyses. In fact one of the benefits of engaging in action research is to demystify the notion of research, and the idea that one needs a licence to practice. All teachers can do research, and should be encouraged to add a reflective teaching / action research dimension to their professional armory.

The idea of setting up a support network with a facilitator (me), was to assist teachers develop the basic skills of research design. These included:

- identifying a problem and tuning it into a researchable question;
- deciding on appropriate data and data collection methods
- determining the best way of collecting and analyzing the data
- evaluating to research plan and reducing it to manageable proportions

Lack of ongoing support

The third most frequently nominated challenge was lack of support ‘on the ground’. This lack of support most often came from the individual to whom the teacher reported (most typically the Departmental Chair or Panel Head), or, in some cases, the school Principal. In some cases the Principal refused to sign the release allowing the research to go ahead. In other instances, it was done reluctantly – the attitude being “Well, this is a lot of nonsense, but if you want to go ahead and waste you’re time, feel free. However don’t let it interfere with you proper job – which is to teach.”

Interestingly, resistance and negativity sometimes came from colleagues. This took the form of an attitude that to do research indicated that one had ideas above one’s station. Lurking behind these negative attitudes was the notion that the proper job for a teacher is to teach, not to do research, and that this ‘make believe’ role as researcher was not a legitimate thing for a teacher to be doing.

To be fair, the opposite reaction was also encountered. A number of teachers reported that their status and esteem had risen among their peers as a result of having taken part in the action research network.

Fear of being revealed as an incompetent teacher

This was an interesting reaction. Any form of research carries within it the possibility of a negative result – or indeed no result at all. This view is reinforced to a certain extent by mainstream published research which rarely reports that research outcomes were inconclusive. These teachers were investigating aspects of their own practice. An inconclusive or negative outcome could be interpreted as a sign of failure, an indication that the person was an incompetent teacher. The fact that the results would be made public (see below) added to the anxiety of the teachers.

Fear of producing a public account of their research for a wider (unknown) audience.

This was the final most frequently nominated problem area. It was also the one over which I as the facilitator had the greatest difficulty. Teachers who have no trouble developing a sensible and coherent plan and putting it into action balked when it came to writing up and making their research public. A number wanted to stop at this point, asking “why do we have to make it public” and “I find writing so difficult.”

The answer, of course, is that without a public account, the exercise is reflective teaching, not action research. The publication need not be

Solutions

We have experimented with a number of solutions to the problems. Chances of success for any given project will be maximized if:

- There is someone ‘on the ground’ to ‘own’ the project.
- One or more advisors with training in research methods and experience in doing research are available as needed to provide assistance and support to teachers.
- Teachers are given some release time from face-to-face teaching during the course of their action research.
- Create collaborative teams, desirably across schools or teaching sites, so that teachers involved in similar areas of inquiry can support one another.

- Teachers are given adequate training in methods and techniques for identifying issues, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and presenting the outcomes of their research.

Have someone on the ground to 'own' the project

Completing an action research project is a little like completing a marathon at the same time as you carry out a wide range of other tasks. In order to succeed, teachers have to be in it for the long haul. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, most teachers 'hit the wall' (as marathon runners say). Energy and enthusiasm begin to wane, and the many teachers are tempted to put off essential tasks, or even abandon the project completely.

Having an enthusiastic team member to act as a cheerleader can go a long way towards maintaining the enthusiasm of the group. In both of the action research networks I advised, a local facilitator filled this role. Both were senior teachers who had considerable experience as educational administrators. Importantly, they had also successfully completed action research projects of their own. This gave them credibility among teachers, and enabled them to act as a bridge between teachers and educational bureaucrats and administrators.

These local facilitators were proactive as well as reactive. They maintained frequent contact with the teachers involved in the network through telephone, email, and occasionally face-to-face meetings, and were able to identify those teachers who were 'at risk' of dropping out. When teachers contacted them with practical problems and blockages they were able to offer advice from their own perspective.

One or more advisors with training in research methods and experience in doing research are available as needed to provide assistance and support to teachers.

Even with the support of a collaborative network of fellow teachers, doing action research can be lonely and isolating. The chances of long term success will be enhanced if someone is available at reasonably short notice to provide technical advice. This is important at all stages of the action research cycle.

In the case of the action research networks I have drawn on to illustrate this paper, one of the local facilitators was in the middle of doing a doctorate, and was able to answer many teachers' queries directly. The other facilitator had a recently completed master's degree, and was able to get help from his former professors. As project advisor, I was also available to advise facilitators and teachers as required.

Teachers are given some release time from face-to-face teaching during the course of their action research.

As I mentioned in the preceding section, the single greatest impediment to the successful completion of an action research study is time, or the lack thereof. It is also a factor militating against teachers' doing their best. The hundred and one pressures faced by teachers as they go about their daily professional lives conspire to push action research to the bottom of the agenda.

An operating principle I have tried to adhere to (with rare success) is that if you put something in then you should take something out. In other words, if you add a new

item to your daily agenda, then you should remove an existing item. One way of freeing up time for teachers to do quality action research is to give them less teaching to do.

This may seem a risible suggestion in this day and age when bureaucrats and bean-counters have taken charge of educational agendas in many parts of the world. However, it is surprising what can be achieved with persistence and a well formulated rationale. In our action research networks, we had some success. In one case, a principal agreed to adjust teaching loads so that while teachers had the same annual teaching load, they did comparatively less teaching in the semester in which they were doing their action research. In other cases, schedules were rearranged so that teachers had blocks of time (in one case one whole day a week) free to focus on their research.

Create collaborative teams, desirably across schools or teaching sites, so that teachers involved in similar areas of inquiry can support one another.

This was the essence of our action research networks. Unlike Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, I do not believe that collaboration should be a defining feature of action research. It is, nonetheless, highly desirable. Teachers who are mutually engaged in action research inquiry of a similar nature understand one another in ways that others involved in the educational enterprise will not. In the words of Donald Freeman, "To tell the story, you have to know the story." In other words, to be able to understand and convey an experience, you have to have lived that experience from the inside.

There is no doubt that the collaborative teams we set out within our action research networks provided tremendous support for the teachers involved and materially enhanced the quality of the outcomes. While supportive round-table discussions sometimes became 'grouch' sessions, these were relatively rare. On the whole, teachers reported a great deal of satisfaction with the support they received from their colleagues.

Teachers are given adequate training in methods and techniques for identifying issues, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and presenting the outcomes of their research.

Like any other project, from buying a home to writing a novel, success demands adequate planning and preparation. In the case of action research, giving teachers training in research methods and providing adequate planning time *before* they embark on the research, will enhance the chances of success. At the beginning of the process, once teachers have identified an issue, problem or puzzle, the trick is to get them to think small. Many teachers, in the first enthusiastic flush of the project, begin sketching out a proposal that would require a piece of doctoral research to deal with.

Another challenge is to convince teachers that qualitative data collection and analysis is research. Many who have had minimal contact with research come to the project with the mistaken idea that research must necessarily involve number crunching. Ironically, it is this notion that lies behind much of the trepidation that teachers feel about doing research.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to make a case for the use of action research as tool for professional growth and development. In the first part of the paper, I defined action research, suggesting that it contained all of the ingredients of ‘regular’ research, but that its unique quality was the centrality of the classroom practitioner in initiating and carrying out the research. I then illustrated the various steps in the action research cycle.

In the next paper of the paper, I presented empirical data drawn from two action research networks that provides strong support for the claim that involvement in action research can have a positive effect on teachers’ professional growth and development.

The final part of the paper also drew on data from the action research networks. In this section, I looked at the problems and pitfalls faced by teachers who were engaged in action research. I then described some of the strategies that helped teachers over these roadblocks to successfully completing and presenting their research.

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Biodata

David Nunan is Chair Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Hong Kong and President of Anaheim University. He has been an action researcher for over 30 years. (29 words).

TESOL ACADEMY: Warm up task

A qualitative study revealed that involvement in action research resulted in the following behaviors as being potentially affected by involvement in action research. In a follow up questionnaire completed by teachers AFTER doing action research, some behaviors occurred significantly more often, some occurred less often and some occurred about with about the same frequency. Can you predict which were which? (Check the columns.)

What effect did involvement in the action research project have on your teaching practices overall?

Action	More	About the same	Less
1. tend to be directive 2. try to use a greater variety of behaviors 3. praise students 4. criticize students 5. am aware of students' feelings 6. give directions 7. am conscious of my non-verbal behavior 8. use the target language in class 9. am conscious of non-verbal cues of students 10. try to incorporate student ideas into my teaching 11. spend more class time talking myself 12. try to get my students working in groups 13. try to get divergent open-ended student responses 14. distinguish between enthusiasm and lack of order 15. try to get students to participate			

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