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ACTION RESEARCH

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There is a growing body of literature of teachers' accounts of their attempts to implement improvement and change in classrooms and schools. This literature is evidence that Australian teachers are thinking more reflectively and critically about their work than ever before.

This paper will attempt to define action research, and explore its characteristics and the epistemological and theoretical framework that has grown out of it.

The use of the term action research is fairly widespread, but there does not appear to be universal acceptance of a single definition.

Two definitions quoted here encompass the notions of the spiral in planning, acting, observing and reflecting, and collaboration.

Educational action research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programmes and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. Participants in the action being considered are integrally involved in all these activities.

(Grundy & Kemmis, 1982, p.84)

This definition was formulated from a list of attributes of action research contributed by participants in a seminar at The National Conference on Action Research, Deakin University in 1981. Another definition, shorter and less precise, highlights the way action research can encourage sharing and co-operation.

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Action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experience and make this experience accessible to others.

(McTaggart *et al.*, cited in Holliday, 1982, p.36)

It appears that the only appropriate subject matter for action research is social practice or, more specifically, a certain social practice to be defined in a particular situation. For this reason both definitions give central importance to the notion of strategic action (social practice) and it is claimed that action research is the preferred research method whenever a social practice is the focus of research activity. The idea behind this claim is that social practices are essentially risky activities that are subject to many incidental happenings and hence require cautious judgments and interpretations that cannot be justified solely by reference to rules or theories.

Clearly, the differences between the action research model and traditional (empirical - analytical) research models contribute to the developing epistemological framework of action research.

Traditional educational research has had little effect on the way teachers and administrators go about solving their professional problems (Holliday, 1982). Several factors contribute to this:

- the scientific approach to research is typically used by professional researchers rather than by practitioners. Behind this is a hierarchical belief based on the idea that researchers have more knowledge than teachers to do the job of researching properly;
- researchers typically study other people's problems; problems which the other people must face and eventually solve for themselves;
- researchers justify their scientific investigations by forming generalisations and conclusions for teachers to apply to their own particular circumstances;
- putting theory into practice is not the immediate concern of the researcher;
- researchers don't always communicate with those who would benefit the most. Printed research materials in the form of monographs or theses are largely inaccessible to most teachers (both physically, and in the language used); and

- researchers often do not have direct day-to-day contact with or responsibilities in the complexities of classroom life.

The following table illustrates how these factors tend to make change, as a result of empirical-analytical investigations, slow in coming, and introduces the notion of inquiry in which the practitioner is involved. Human behaviour is most likely to change when a person tries to improve a situation which makes a difference to him or her. So, it follows that a teacher's own investigations into ways of satisfying his or her personal needs will have a more substantial influence on that teacher's understandings and practices than impersonal research reports. When engaged in action research, teachers participate in their own learning by actually doing something, rather than reading about doing something.

TRADITIONAL RESEARCH	ACTION RESEARCH
.Research into practice undertaken by researchers whose aim it is to inform or improve practice by the generation of theoretical principles to be used by practitioners as externally validated guides into their practice.	.Research into practice by practitioners for practitioners.
.Committed to a pre-determined design.	.Flexible and tentative; the investigator will not know definitely and in advance the exact pattern of inquiry that will develop.
.Researcher-centred, theory producing emphasis.	.Teacher-centred, practice improving emphasis.
.Its value is judged by the amount of knowledge it adds to an already existing bank of knowledge.	.Its value is judged according to the degree to which improvements in practice take place.
.Develops generalisations which can apply to large populations from experimenting with random selections.	.Studies a particular existing small population, e.g., a classroom of children; normally doesn't and can't generalise beyond the circumstances of the action research. Generalisations can only be formed and applied beyond the original population if the circumstances and conditions remain the same.
.Perpetuates the theory/practice gap because teachers who will be the implementers of the theory (or curriculum decision) aren't involved in the formulation of it or decision-making.	.Bridges the theory/practice gap by focusing on attitudes, needs, opinions and practices of teachers.

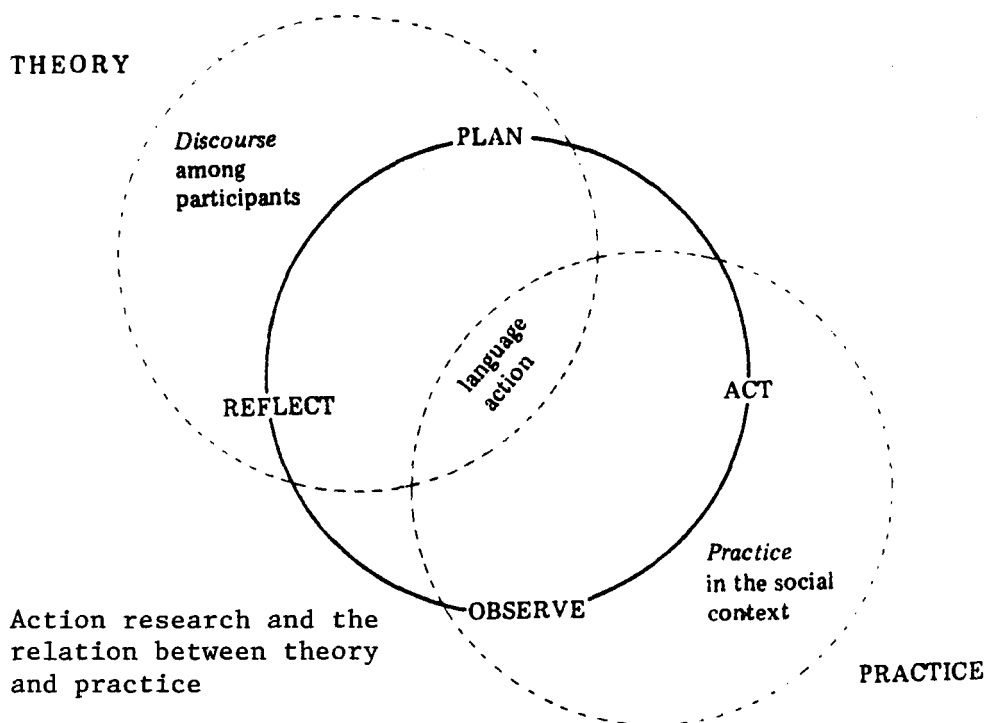
The final point in this table brings out a crucial argument that advocates for action research emphasise.

Traditionally, a problem of educational inquiry is this perceived gap between research-inquiry and teacher-practice. Educational researchers and teachers appear to operate within different theoretical paradigms (Henry, cited in Holliday, 1982:19)

The assumption that theories which are a result of empirical-analytical investigations can be applied by teachers to improve their practice can be questioned if it is acknowledged that teachers have their own educational theories which have developed from their understandings of their experience. Although these theories are not necessarily systematically learned or explicitly stated, underlying them is a set of beliefs, values and assumptions about teaching and learning. Any plan for change must surely recognise the practical theories of teachers as these define what is possible or impractical in the classroom.

From the perspective of action research there is no gap between theory and practice, as the theory has been developed from action that has arisen out of the teachers' own experiences and their reflections on these experiences. By generating their own professional knowledge teachers become more autonomous. It is interesting to note that conventional research usually takes place after a particular practice has been observed, whereas action research guides practice rather than instigating it. This view causes theory and practice to be seen as dynamic and complementary aspects of the same whole, rather than two polarities.

McTaggart (1982) holds that theory informs practice through being tested in practice, and represents this diagrammatically as follows:



Carr and Kemmis (1983) have a lot to say about the relationship between theory and practice and their epistemological developments have helped to legitimate practical developments that are occurring all over Australia (e.g. process writing instigated by Donald Graves; the new spelling curriculum and conference reading approaches; the introduction of a new handwriting style.)

Action research requires a different epistemological framework from empirical-analytical research, as the assumptions underlying its practice are different.

The rationale of an action research project could be summarized by the following basic assumptions:-

- a school is the teachers; teachers' understandings and practices influence the total life in a school;
- teachers, more than any other party, sense a school's problems and its areas of malfunction;
- teachers have the potential resources for changing and renewing a school;
- this potentiality may not be fully realised and could be brought about by an outsider or facilitator. One of the roles of a facilitator would be to identify resources;
- becoming aware of these resources co-exists with personal growth;
- personal growth is coupled with institutional growth.

In action research the perception of the teacher's role and the teaching profession is a developmental one rather than an instrumental one. According to the developmental perception, generalisations derived from past experiences cannot be formulated as general rules which prescribe good practice. As such, the generalisations are retrospective and could be of great help to the teacher as sensitisers which facilitate the development of new insight for a redefinition of the situation (Stenhouse, 1975). In this way the teacher can form his/her own theory-in-action (Schon, 1983).

Thus, the teacher is a generator of professional knowledge and not an applier of knowledge. According to the instrumental perception knowledge is formulated by theorists of education (Stenhouse, 1975).

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS?

The two essential aims of action research activity are to improve and to involve. Improvement is aimed for in three areas:

1. improvement of practice;
2. improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners (professional development); and
3. improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place.

The aim of involvement goes hand-in-hand with the aim of improvement. Action research is a social form of research: those involved in the situation being investigated are to be involved in the process in all its phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The use of the term 'involvement' refers to information exchange and informal decision-making.

Related to these aims is an emphasis on teachers reflecting more about the practice of education in their institution. Elliot (1978) discusses three modes of self-reflection -

1. Deliberative reflection - related to choice and is prescriptive for action.
2. Evaluative reflection - related to response and focuses on the extent to which the chosen response has been implemented and whether its consequences were worthwhile.
3. Action research - related to diagnosis.

It is important to distinguish between diagnosis and symptoms when considering action research as a vehicle for change. Symptoms are usually the things that immediately strike the practitioner as being wrong, whereas the basic problem is the hidden reason or cause of the symptoms. Many change programs fail because they tend to deal with the symptoms only. Dealing with symptoms is a continuation of the system rather than a change in the system. This is perhaps illustrated best in an example: at school we have a problem of noise, rowdiness, poor behaviour, vandalism and apathy amongst the children. These are the identified symptoms. Rather than diagnosing the problem, i.e., investigating why children or, for that matter, teachers accept different norms of behaviour at school, the executive has leapt into a program of painting, cleaning, planting gardens, putting more teachers on duty, and generally

dealing with the symptoms in a more-of-the-same way. The consequences of this type of activity tends to lend truth to the saying "the more you change the more they stay the same". It all becomes a vicious cycle where no real change occurs. So, briefly, the characteristics of action research are:

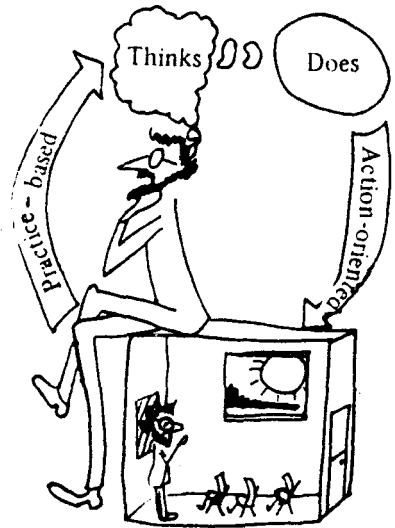
- it investigates human actions and social situations which are experienced by teachers as unacceptable in some aspects, susceptible to change, and requiring a practical response. It is concerned with everyday practical problems experienced by teachers and can be carried out by the teachers themselves or by someone they nominate to do it for them;

- it deepens the teachers' understanding or diagnosis of the problem. This understanding indicates generally an appropriate action;

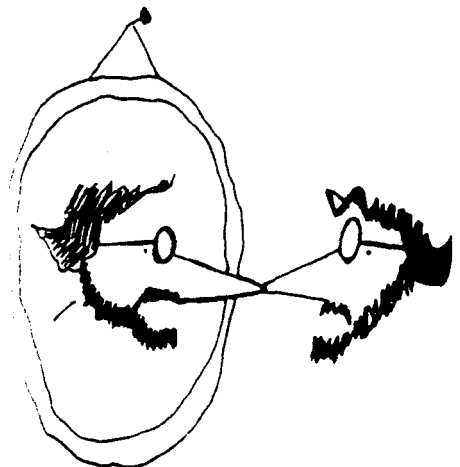
- any action intended to change the situation is temporarily suspended until a deeper understanding of the practical problem has been achieved. In many change initiatives the urge to change triggers immediate action before desired goals can be identified;

- when reported it is usually in anecdotal or narrative form, as it explains the event by "relating it to a context of mutually interdependent contingencies" (Elliot, 1982, p.356) i.e., events depend on each other for their occurrence. These relationships are shown by concrete description rather than by formal statements of causal laws and statistical correlations. It provides a theory of the situation that is naturalistic theory rather than formal theory.

It is action-oriented



It is self-reflective



- it interprets the events from the point of view of those acting in the problem situation. These events are interpreted as human actions and are expressions of a person's understandings of and beliefs about the situation;
- it looks at a situation from a participant's point of view and explains it in language that people use every day to describe and explain human actions and social situations in their daily life. It is claimed that action research can then be validated by unconstrained dialogue with the participants.



Think about Action Research as being:

Naturalistic
Studying real settings
not artificially contrived ones

Responsive
Studying the issues
These settings 'contain'—
not preordained questions

Historico-critical
Studying why these things are
as they are and how
they came to be that
way, not why
they aren't as they
should be.

THE ACTION RESEARCH SPIRAL

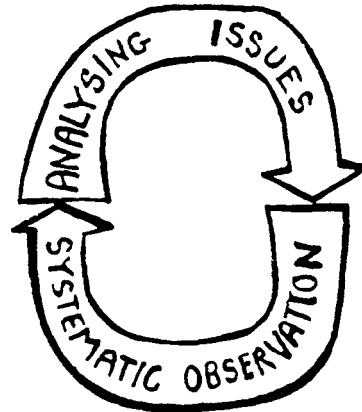
As already stated, the very nature of action research is essentially risky. Strategic action (i.e., an action consciously and deliberately undertaken on the basis of reflection by the practitioner) is constructed. It is a probe or a prospective action into an unknown future. Action research makes the probing character of strategic action problematic (Grundy and Kemmis, 1982). It reconstructs past action on the basis of observation, and constructs future action in the light of reflection. Action can only be explained retrospectively in order to take into account the situations that are problematic for the practitioners, i.e., disruptions due to unforeseen factors, adaptations to spontaneously arising interests, constraints placed on the practitioner within the context he/she is working in. It requires judgments based on what Grundy and Kemmis (1982) term "personal knowledge". Personal knowledge is dynamic and never complete. It is neither subjective nor objective and is developed through systematic reflection on strategic action by the practitioner involved. This knowledge is judged on the criteria of authenticity -

When personal knowledge arises out of one's own rational reflection upon one's strategic action, it may be regarded as authentic.

(Grundy and Kemmis, 1982, p.85)

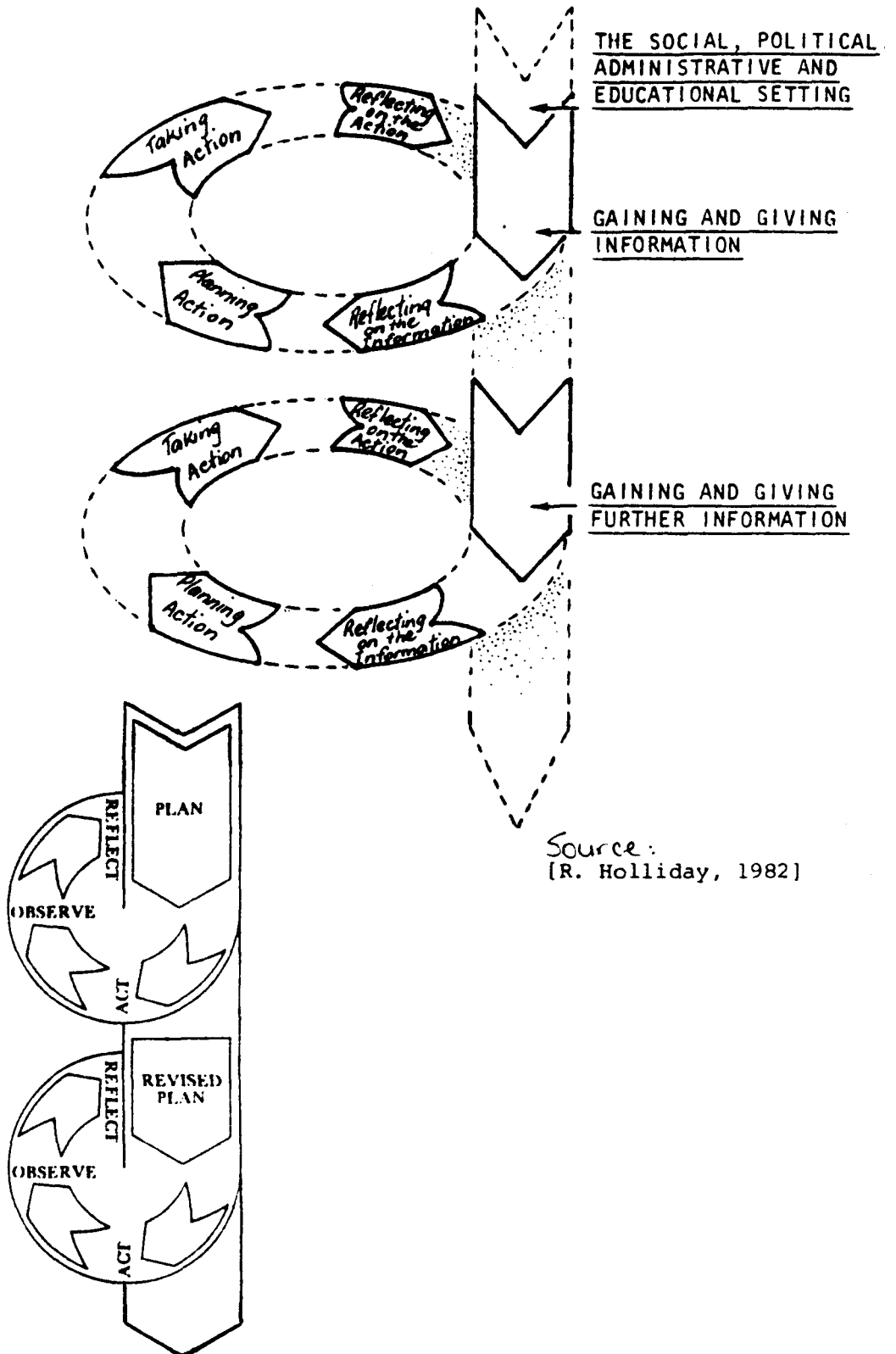
This means that the practitioner can verify the truth of an interpretation or judgment without referring to rules and principles defined by empirical-analytical research. *What are the implications of this for how teachers go about their practice?*

The retrospective and prospective elements of action research are described in the following table in relation to the four activities action researchers carry out. The table is a combination of one from Carr and Kemmis (1983, p.164) and information from Holliday (1982, pp.46-51) and illustrates the alternation between discourse (theory) and practice, and construction and reconstruction.

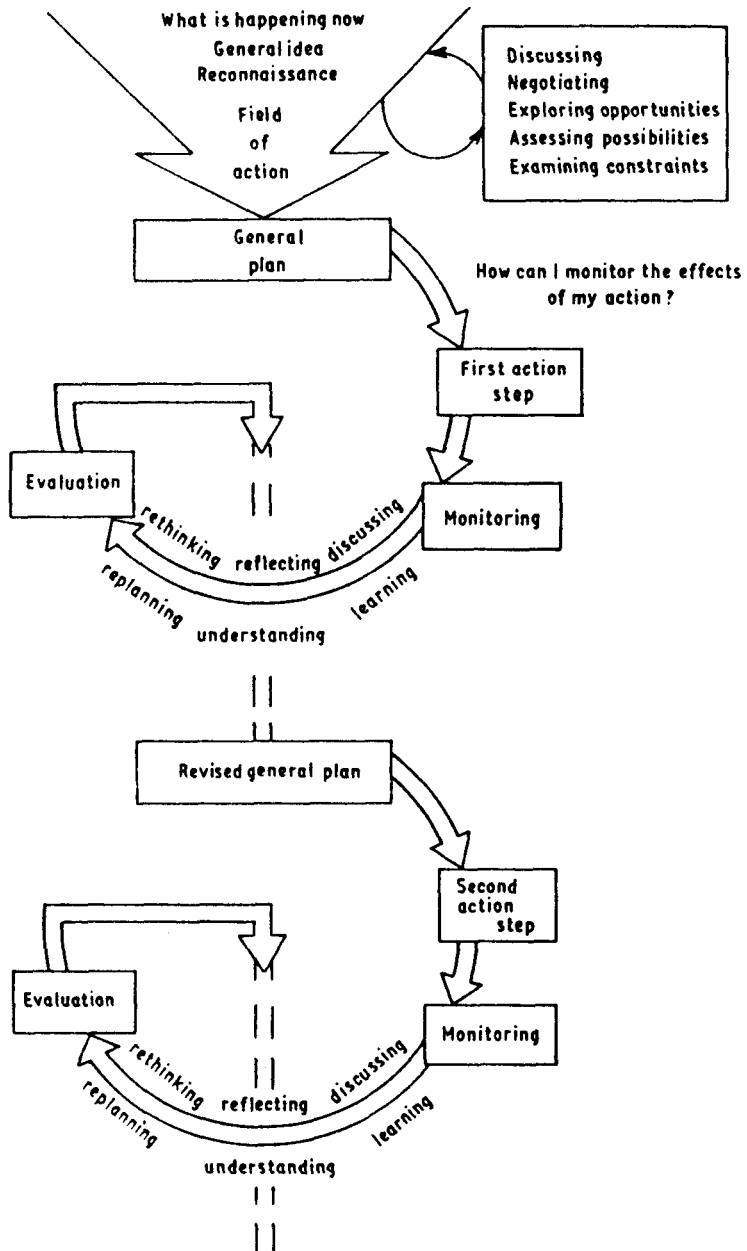


Action research is a kind of cyclical process of redefining issues in the light of new information and evidence, then gathering new evidence as the issue evolves...

Reconstructive		Constructive	
4 REFLECTING		1 PLANNING	
Discourse among participants	- retrospective on observations - reflects upon all phases of the process with a view to formulating a revised general plan, i.e., entering into the next cycle, which will take into account the unanticipated effects of the first plan. This phase hinges on the notion that it is not sufficient to just be reflective. A practitioner must also be reflective in that he/she must step outside the circumstances and consider how they occurred and what part he/she played in them.	- prospective to action (constructed action; it must look forward) - involves six main factors: 1. <i>the general idea</i> that something might be improved; 2. <i>reconnaissance</i>: identification of constraints and opportunities; decisions made on how to exert the best effect; needs of individual and groups in the context in which the action is to occur are identified; 3. <i>field of action</i>: a description of the circumstances of the proposed action (rationale, first decisions, timetable etc.); 4. <i>first action step</i> will not lead to improvement but will offer direction for the next step; 5. <i>monitoring</i> to provide information necessary for reflection; 6. <i>timetable</i>: details of the strategic action.	
3 OBSERVING		2 ACTING	
Practice in the social context	- prospective for reflection - usually documented - "making meaning of what is happening"(McTaggart <i>et al.</i>, cited in Holliday, 1982, p.50) by seeking to document improvements in practice and in the situation, and developing understandings.	- retrospective guidance from planning deliberate and controlled strategic action.	

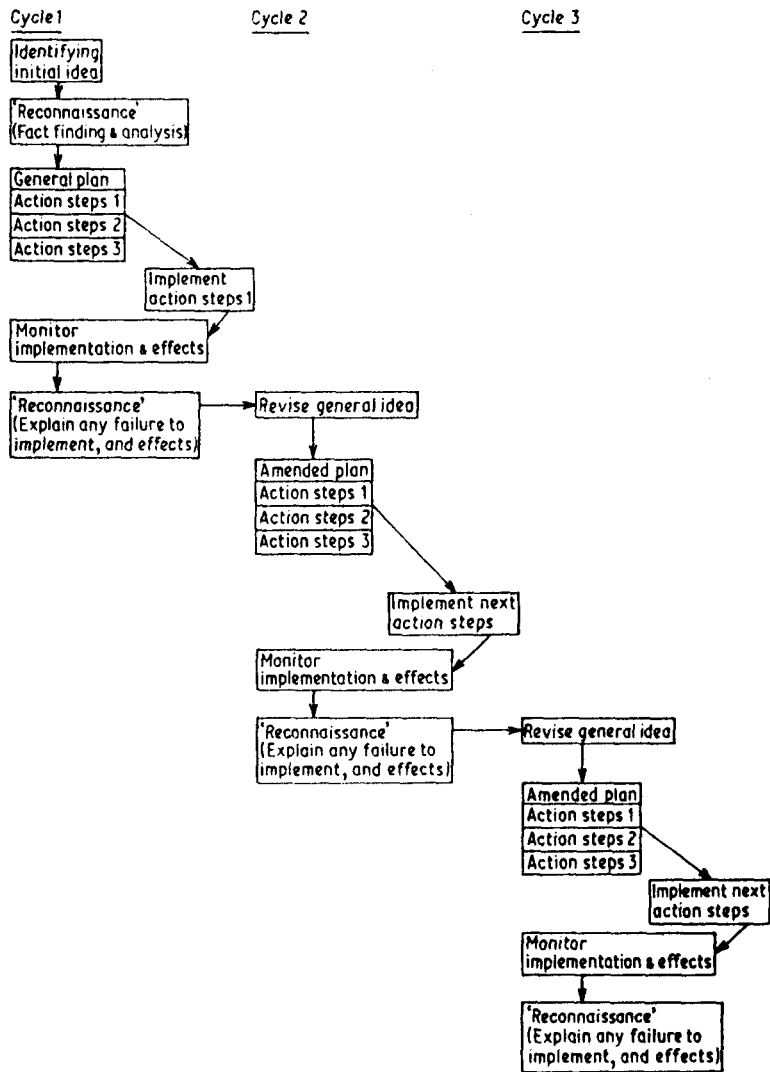


The action research spiral



From Walker (1985 p. 196 and 197)

Action research as a spiral staircase

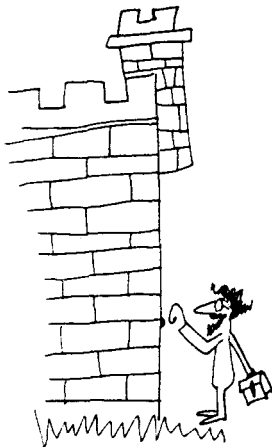


The phases of action research occur continuously, not simply as a single loop cycle but as a spiral. The revised plan formulated in the reflection phase incorporating what was learned in the previous cycle is the probe into the future that forms the notion of a continual spiral.

Carr and Kemmis (1983) term single loop activities as "arrested action research", and identify three kinds of this that stand out in educational research and evaluation -

1. if what is learned in one cycle is not applied in further cycles, then the process becomes a problem-solving exercise;
2. where new planned action is not implemented or monitored as a basis for further review and improvement, the arrested cycle becomes a mechanism for the rationalisation of old or prospective practices rather than a process of continual learning and development.
3. The single loop can be used as a persuasive tool for leading participants to a group decision which will more likely ensure implementation of a desired action.

True action research extends the process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting into review and improvement. Improvements in understanding cause critical analysis of the present situation and improvements in practice chip away at the constraints on practice imposed by the present situation, thus generating pressure for change.



...the citadel of established practice will seldom fall to the polite knock of a good idea. It may, however, yield to a long siege, a pre-emptive, a wooden horse or a cunning alliance. Sound strategies are chosen with a view to the observed nature of the case.

THE CASE AGAINST ACTION RESEARCH

There is a distinct lack of literature of a critical nature about action research. Surely no solution to teachers' problems could be so successful that it is above criticism. Perhaps this implies that people have accepted action research unthinkingly and passively and that writers advocating it hesitate to discuss its negative aspects in case they impede its progress (Hodgkinson, 1982).

Gibson (1985) compares action research metaphorically with the Salvation Army - "good intentions, moral fervour, high commitment and a paradoxically egalitarian hierarchy characterises both bodies." He claims that, like the Salvation Army, it has its "own particular quality which diffuses and inhibits criticism" (p.59). He sees action research providing for teachers "elastoplast, kind words and moral exhortation", as the Salvation Army is the "sticking plaster, solace and conscience of society". He does concede, however, that action has certainly improved practice at the classroom level. Gibson's main reservations about action research stem from Carr and Kemmis's (1983) attempts to provide a philosophical justification (namely critical theory) for teachers as researchers and encourage school-based innovation. By undermining what they perceive to be conformist views and ideas in education, in particular the concepts of theory and practice, they attempt to work out an idea of an educational science which will be the foundation of action research.

Gibson (1985) holds that Carr and Kemmis's (1983) views threaten the present practice of action research for the following reasons:

- it (*Becoming Critical : Knowing through Action Research*) is uncritical (doesn't practise what it preaches);
- its prescriptions are likely to result in increased conformity (it would produce its own rigid orthodoxy);
- it is naive about group processes;
- it prefers the group over the individual;
- it is bedazzled by the notion of "science";
- it rejects objectivity, yet privileges its own view of reality;
- it lacks modesty in its claims and perceptions and is highly contradictory;
- it has too much respect for the authority of critical theory;

- it insufficiently acknowledges that action research at the three levels (interpersonal, institutional and structural) involves different activities and levels of difficulty for action researchers; and

- in its preference for institutional and structural levels it is attempting to set action research on a course very different from its present practice.

It is perhaps this final point that is at the root of all Gibson's objections. It appears that he sees action research as making the most impact at the interpersonal level (i.e., the classroom) and sees Carr and Kemmis as trying to make much more of it than it actually is by "proposing a radical transformation of the practice unenvisaged by its practitioners" (Gibson, 1985, p.64). In his closing statement he urges action researchers to ask themselves if they really wish to "don the uniform and march towards the promised emancipation" by using this particular text.

In the light of this, it is important to look at other reservations that surface from closer scrutiny of the readings -

- generally, teachers are not familiar with the basic techniques of research. This may be a fault with teacher training institutions. Combined with this is a general feeling that research is no place for an amateur. There is a notion of professionalism about research which causes teachers to be reluctant to try it themselves;
- time also tends to disqualify teachers from doing research. Adding research to the already long list of teachers' duties may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. If working as part of a group it is important to recognise that group process is a big time consumer;
- teachers move to different schools with different populations frequently. Hence, research undertaken with a particular group of learners may not be applicable to a group the teacher has in later years. Action research generalisations assume that the population being observed represents future similar populations. So, the degree to which these generalisations are reliable depends on the degree to which the original population sample is representative of the total of future cumulated samples;

- and finally, how do you judge which action research is "good" and which is "bad"? Do you judge according to how much teachers change, or how much students change, or how much classroom practice is altered? How do you measure this change? In empirical-analytical research validity and reliability tests can be used but action research study reports rarely mention how valid or reliable the study was.

Is there a time and place for action research and if so, where and when is that? And after engaging in action research, how far-reaching should or can its results be?

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