

## **Improving educational practice: action research as an appropriate methodology**

Japie Heydenrych  
Bureau for University Teaching, Unisa

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article aims to explore action research as a suitable methodology for emancipated educators. An attempt will be made to formulate an acceptable definition of action research, and a classification of types of action research as found in the literature will be presented. Action research is presented as a methodology or research framework that assists educators in critically evaluating their practice and in systematically arriving at new rationales for and changes in such practice. Finally some help will be provided for those who want to engage in action research for the first time.

### **INTRODUCING ACTION RESEARCH**

Action research promises to provide educators with a methodology that will enable them to take control of their practice, and to establish change in their respective educational environments. Their systematic attempts in this regards can also be part of the formal body of research that supports educational practice.

For Foster (1972) action research assigns a different role to the researcher. Action research is a systematically evolving process, a living process changing both the researcher and the situations in which he or she acts. Neither the natural sciences nor the historical sciences have this double aim: living the dialectic of researcher and researched (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:21). The researcher's role is characterised by the immediacy of the researcher's involvement in the action process. The researcher becomes as much a subject and learner as the participants. Action research is therefore not simply research done on other people. Participants are autonomous responsible agents who are making their own histories. In its methodology, action research is not about hypothesis testing or about using data to come to conclusions. It differs from the traditional research approach in that it is based on intersubjectivity, and therefore collective meaning making and action – in other words, it is about praxis. As far as collecting data and evidence, and analysis are concerned, action research is open-minded. We need not only to keep records that describe what is happening as openly as possible, but also to collect and analyse our own judgements, reactions and impressions about what is going on.

### **What action research is about**

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:21) provide us with a few characteristics that action research should not associate with. Action research is not the usual thing that teachers do when they think about their teaching – in other words, it does not resemble day-to-day work life. It is also not simply about solving problems. Rather, it is about making practice, that has been accepted as justified, problematic. It is also motivated by a drive for continuous understanding and change.

Action research is conducted in self-reflective cycles of:

- Planning;
- Acting (implementing plans);
- Observing (systematically);
- Reflection.

The cycles are continued in a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, reflecting ... and re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting, etc.

As the spiral develops, understanding and practice evolve through the process of group critique and collaborative action. This process helps us to obtain a reasoned justification of our educational work. Through this self-critical activity and constructive action, we create a developed, tested and critically examined rationale for what we are doing. In the process we are empowered to question our discourse, practice and organisation, and we are emancipated from restrictive systems and false consciousness governing our own capabilities to question and to initiate change. Action research cannot just be seen as a pattern of endless efforts. Although it is a long-term commitment, the dynamic nature (upward movement) of improvement of practice is at the heart of the spiralling effort.

### **A definition**

For the purposes of excluding certain characteristics of traditional research and including the unique opportunity that action research provides educators with, I find it useful to integrate two complementary opinions. The first one is preferred by numerous authors, and formulated by Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (Henry & Kemmis 1985:1; Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:5):

Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social and educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.

Although this definition should be sufficient, I couldn't forget the short but extremely powerful promise that action research made to Gloria Bravette (1996:4-6). For her, action research is a deliberate, systematic, critical, emancipatory process carried out in collaboration with others sharing a common concern. Her view of the value of action research is closely related to the concept of "conscientisation" as used by Paulo Freire (1972). Through the action research process participants develop from believing that their socio-cultural reality is a given, to a state where they become emancipated and empowered to understand and write their own socio-cultural reality.

A final attempt at a definition of action research for educators would read as follows:

Action research is a deliberate, critical, and emancipatory enquiry undertaken systematically and collaboratively by participants in order to understand and improve the rationality and justice of their educational practices.

Action research aims at empowering the educator to take control of the educational environment and to become critical of practice and systems. It is worthwhile to distinguish action research with this aim from other types of action research, as has been classified by various authors.

### **THE CRITICAL EMANCIPATED PRACTITIONER**

The majority of authors support the classification of action research into three types (Mezirow 1981:3-24; Masters 1995; Zuber-Skerrit 1996; Kemmis 1993; Hatten, Knapp & Salonga 1997):

- Scientific-technical (instrumental)
- Practical-deliberative
- Critical-emancipatory

This classification is based on the critical theory of Jurgen Habermas (in Mezirow 1981:3-24). According to Habermas, all theories, especially the ones that present themselves as neutral and objective, are ideologies concealing their own vested interests. They are dressed up in the guise of ahistorical rationalisation. Critical theory has the task of disclosing these vested interests, which Habermas classifies into technical (instrumental), practical and emancipatory.

Technical knowledge is based on empirical knowledge and is governed by technical rules. Hypothetical-deductive theories are aimed at controlling the environment through controlled observation and experimentation. Action research, in this category, is mostly practiced by traditional university researchers acting as outside experts entering the context through co-optation. Kemmis (1993) goes on to describe this category as amateur action research.

Cognitive interests are behind practical knowledge. It is concerned with the learning domain and based on interaction or communicative interaction. This action is governed by binding consensual norms, "which define reciprocal expectations about behaviour and which must be understood and recognised by at least two acting subjects" (Mezirow 1981:3-24). The methods used in empirical, analytical social sciences are not appropriate here, but we need a systematic understanding that seeks understanding of meaning rather than to establish causality. The methods of the historical-hermeneutic sciences are more appropriate as they refer to interpretation and explanation. Facts are constituted by understanding of meaning and not through observation. The researcher has more or less a Socratic role in encouraging consensual understanding and meaning forming within a cooperative environment (Zuber-Skerrit 1996).

Emancipatory knowledge embodies the aim of self-knowledge. Through self-reflection one's history has to be explored in order to see how it has expressed itself in the way one sees oneself, one's roles and expectations (Mezirow 1981:3-24). Emancipation is to be obtained from institutional and environmental forces that limit our options and rational control over our lives - these we seemed to have accepted as beyond our control. For Habermas, the critical social sciences with the goal of critique are more appropriate towards this aim. An initial non-reflective consciousness is transformed into a self-reflective one where the subject is released from the dependence of hypothesised powers (Mezirow 1981:3-24). Emancipatory action research is always social in that it understands itself as a concrete and practical expression of the aspiration to change the social or educational world for the better by improving shared social practices (Kemmis 1993). It is critical and activist as a form of collaborative learning through doing. Educators will be enabled to understand themselves as agents as well as products of the history of education and society. The action researcher has no role in a hierarchy and is normally, at least as an educator, just as much a learner or participant as the so-called subjects in the research.

Educators would therefore be empowered, and emancipated from their learned incapacity, by gaining the skills of action research - they would become critical towards their own practice and relations. With this mission action research differs from traditional positivistic research. In this regard it is important to highlight opposing qualities.

## **ACTION RESEARCH AS ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH FOR EDUCATORS**

Zuber-Skerrit (1992) quotes Limerick who accentuates action research's humble beginnings and great potential for change and development: "Action research as a concept, a philosophy and a methodology of learning has arrived .... What has been for many years a trickle of protest at conventional research and learning methods has become a major stream of thought which is attracting a great deal of attention in Australia and overseas ... The new operation of collaborative individuals capable of bringing down the Berlin Wall was hardly likely to tolerate the implacable imperatives of institutionalised education. They found an alternative in the emancipatory processes of action research."

Comstock (1982:371) highlights the necessity for a critical method of research. The aim of such research should be the "self-conscious practice that liberates humans from ideologically frozen conceptions of the actual and the possible". Positivist methodologies contributed to the

alienation of subjects of social science research from their social, political, and economic institutions. Action research is a consistent critical method that treats society as a human construction and people as the active subjects of that construction. It is based on continuous dialogue with participants and stakeholders, rather than on the observation or experimental manipulation of people.

### **Establishing educational research**

Huberman (1996:130) detects an aggressiveness or militancy in the teacher-research literature due to the misrecognition of their work and the lack of official legitimacy for this kind of work. Huberman (1996:125) points towards an almost constructivist element in the research that teachers may initiate - there is something exciting in the idea that teachers ask questions that researchers may not think to ask, that teachers see patterns that others might not discern unless they have altered their frames of looking.

Zeichner (1994) wants an improved status in power, privilege and voice and status of educational research in general. This could be realised in part by bridging the separation that currently exists between the worlds of teacher research and academic research. The theme of educational study is the educational situation and what is constitutive of such a situation. It is a free dialogue between teacher and student, but authoritarian approaches to research and change, and power relations of society, in general, obstruct this dialogue. Paulo Freire's work illustrates consciousness-raising based on rational reflection and dialogic relations. Freirian educators are committed to emancipation through conscientisation, which is about development of critical consciousness in order to curb control of people further without contravening their own principles (Henry & Rodostianos 1993:7). According to Zeichner (1994), the teacher as a practitioner should be enabled to move beyond the divide between teacher research and academic research. The language of research should be conducive to dialogue across speech communities. There should be genuine dialogue and collaboration between and with teachers. Patterns of dominance must be broken and teacher-initiated enquiry must be supported to develop a common language and shared meanings about research.

### **Linking theory, practice and action**

Education as a critical discipline is interested in revealing what obstructs educational dialogue in order to set it free in the same manner. The goal of educational research is to facilitate the development of reflective teachers, ones who are capable of making both ends and means of education problematic, and who can act on the basis of such deliberations (Noffke 1994:15). Only through such an effort can the gap between research and practice be narrowed.

Weiner (1989:47) mentions a perception that action research, or teacher practitioner research, "stood in opposition to a dominant tradition of positivistic social science in which the study of casual relationships was pursued by testing hypotheses, controlling variables through sampling procedures, and interpreting the concept of evidence as the statistical processing of data". For Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:6) and Hatten, Knapp, and Salonga (1997) action research, as an alternative social science approach, aims to link theory and practice in solving practical problems for practitioners in the field. In fact, the very linking of action with research is the crux of the action research approach. Trying out ideas in practice as a means of increasing knowledge about the curriculum, teaching and learning teachers can improve what happens in the classroom. Action researchers can systematically address the improvement of the rationales for their practice and, in this way, can link theory and practice into the one whole as ideas-in-action.

### **The status of the researcher and the subjects**

Social research should seek rational self-clarity, collective autonomy, and happiness - this is opposed to procedures that demand increased control (Henry & Rodostianos 1993:7). Suggesting philosophical reflection is necessary but however insufficient – dialectical unity of

philosophy and human or social science in the research environment is paramount. Educators work with humans and the laws of human nature are important. The educationist is involved in a reciprocal relationship, which is in fact a subject and subject relationship (not a subject object relationship as with fundamental scientific approaches). The educationist belongs to the same order as his subjects and this is not the same with the natural scientist (Hellesnes 1982:356). Habermas and Apel (in Hellesnes 1982:363) see a critical social science as "setting human consciousness free from hypostatising forces by making these forces appear as they are, as social authority problems connected with material relations, and demanding political, and not technological solutions ...".

Huberman (1996:126; Brock-Utne 1980) argues that because the action research process is embedded in practice, the relationship between the knower and known is significantly altered and the distance decreased. Educational action research attempts to intentionally remove the division between researchers/scientists, on the one hand, and educational practitioners, on the other (Brock-Utne 1980; Klafki 1975). This is conducive to a shared process of learning. Action research demands direct cooperation between researchers and educational practitioners in the field of action, as well as in the process of research. The research design and research instruments are negotiated by all participants. The critical inquiry process in action research is meant to be transformational (Huberman 1996:130). Teachers and participants are enabled to change their situations through reflection and deeper understanding. This is followed by action on the setting that is empowered action.

### **Taking control**

Elliot (1993:07) stresses that true action research looks at problems from the point of view of participants - research from this perspective can only be validated in unconstrained dialogue with those taking part. The separation of knowledge from action and researchers from the researched should be avoided (Gitlin, Siegel & Boru 1989:245). Such a separation can lead to the researcher's understanding of reality being imposed. Gitlin et al (1989:247) see the oppressive relations found in schools as reinforced through the methodology and research process. If the expertise is only with the researcher an oppressive relationship may develop. Emancipatory research puts the researcher back into research and he does not have to hide behind the curtain of objectivity - both parties challenge each other's interpretation of reality (Gitlin et al 1989:250). Thus, everybody becomes a society-making subject (Gitlin et al 251:251).

Teachers should take control of their research as it is embedded in their practice. The idea that the more abstract your work, the higher your status in the academy is a tendency towards mystification in academic research on education, which prevents teachers from gaining access. Zeichner (1994) quotes a teacher: "It seems to me that someone else is having the discussion that we need to have for ourselves and that someone else benefits in an economy that rewards their making sense of our work."

### **Changing systems and structures**

Foster (1972) is of the opinion that the involved nature and collaborative relationship of and within action research, and the participation of people with different roles in a context, may affect the system itself. Foster (1972) sees any action within an organisation as being guided by the needs of that organisation. The research methodology should be such that it addresses the bottom-up identification of needs and action, and that the spirit of cooperation between all participants within the context is of utmost importance.

The structure is a major determinant of organisational behaviour, then changing interpersonal relations, and changing personal insights through self-criticism towards a new understanding of practice and organisational objectives. Foster (1972) supports Silverman when he states that structures themselves do not act, as they are evolved and reacted to by people, and an adequate theory should take note of this.

## **Self-actualisation in the workplace**

Pateman (in Welton 1991:30) sees the work environment as a place where we spend most of our time as professional people. It follows that the workplace experience can have a tremendous impact on the rest of people's lives. If a participatory society is possible, it must be instituted at work, for the workplace is the most political of all areas. The current situation is such that human efficacy can develop more outside the workplace than inside. In general most staff members have given up - their input does not seem to make a difference and they fall into a continuous state of apathetic indolence and emptiness. These people have little ability towards self-actualisation, which is important for re-establishing professional practice. People will have to learn to be of worth to themselves by identifying and taking up their professional ideals. For Welton (1991:37), people have to move from learned helplessness to empowered actors.

Systems may blind us and provide us with a false consciousness regarding our role within the education systems. As educators we may be fulfilling the self-interested objectives of external parties. In practice one may be just the perfect educator, but may not be engaging in the best practice. Oberg (1990:219) quotes a teacher in this regard: "Mr T would enter, distribute books or papers and settle down to another day of stultifying routine. I guess I was the classic Tylorian teacher; my previews were detailed and comprehensive, my objectives beautifully laid out. I gave huge examinations and kept a tight daybook. The Superintendent and the Principal were both very pleased. I wasn't." The proper research approach into practice "will allow me to admit defeat on occasion, and see a beginning of true praxis as described by Paulo Freire – my freedom stems from the realisation that the fraud squad came for me at last". The cyclical praxis-based nature of action research will lead educators to take stock of their teaching practice, and will guide practitioners to look at themselves as professionals and as human beings.

## **Critically assessing practice**

Brooks-Cathcart (nd) makes the following recommendations for prospective action researchers who are interested in improving their professional practice: "Look in your own backyard. Look at the institution where you practice and the people with whom you interrelate. A myriad of possibilities is waiting for you! But you must first know your back yard. You must know how you exist in your back yard, and who lives there with you. But, most importantly, think about how you arrived in this back yard, the person you were then, and who you have become. This may help illuminate for you those practices that do not reflect your values."

Elliot (1993:175) sees the problems of educational change addressed in a group of professional peers where they can with collaborative input enhance their practice. Teaching practice cannot be enhanced by an individualistic attitude. In this regard Somekh and Davies (1991:154-155) see pedagogical competencies of learners and teachers as an integrated reality: learning is about active engagement of the learner, both teachers and learners get cognitively active roles, and assessment of competence depends on listening, observing and responding to learners and reflecting on their products. With a coherent and explicit value system, teachers are involved in a lively reciprocal practice situation. Their continuous commitment to improvement should be supported by a research approach which supports these values.

## **Lifelong professional development**

Molly Lynn Watt (no date) recommends collaborative enquiry to allow teachers to think systematically about their practice and to learn from experience. What will exemplify excellence is a recognition of its complexities, and a commitment to lifelong professional development. Should educators adopt the action research approach, the spiral promises never to end – teachers will have the commitment to continuously assess themselves and their practice. Borgia and Schuler (1996) mention users who report that action research has become a way of life. Action research constitutes a positive, supportive, and proactive resource for change.

In justifying action research as a solution for educators to make impact on their profession, Beverly Johnson (1994) quotes Wolfe: "Teachers often leave a mark on their students, but they seldom leave a mark on their profession." Oberg (1990:217) support Roger's motto: "What I am is what I teach." The life of practice - its spirit or soul - is not discovered by searching for theories, but by probing your own practice continuously and questioning the values governing practice.

## **EXPLAINING THE SPIRAL OF DISCOVERY**

Clem Adelman (1989:179) draws attention to the fact that the action research cycles are about reflection on doing. He calls this process practical reasoning. It is a form of reasoning in which envisaged ends and practical means are considered jointly (collaboratively) in order to improve practice. Bonser and Grundy (1988:36) see action research as facilitating a deliberative approach, using a self-formative process. This process develops out of the discourse of the participants. A spiral discovery of meanings is constituted (Bonser & Grundy 1988:37) to encompass practice.

Action research is a dynamic process in which the four moments are to be understood not as static steps, complete in themselves, but rather as moments in the action research spiral of planning, action, observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:15). This may sound like nothing more than everyday life action. But to do action research is to plan, act, observe and reflect more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously than action in everyday life. In addition, the action researcher will work collaboratively with a purpose.

### **The steps in the cycle**

#### *Planning*

This stage involves a period of reconnaissance and problem analysis before drawing up a strategic plan of action. The plan is to be about forward-looking constructive action. It must recognise that all social action is to some degree unpredictable and therefore somewhat risky – the general plan must be flexible enough to adapt to unforeseen effects and constraints (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:11).

#### *Acting*

This stage involves the implementation of the strategic plan. This action is not completely controlled by plans - it only looks back to the planning phase for its rationale. The implementation of action plans will assume the character of a material, social and political struggle towards improvement (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:12). Due to this flexibility, negotiation and compromise may be necessary. Change may be slow and build in small steps.

#### *Observing*

In essence observation is about documenting the effects of critically informed action by using appropriate methods and techniques agreed upon beforehand. Careful observation is necessary as action will always be limited by constraints of reality that may not be known to participants in advance. Observation must be guided by the intent to provide a sound basis for critical self-reflection with practitioners (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:13).

Throughout all observation phases, one should be persistent about monitoring and plan it well – collecting compelling evidence is essential to ensure that people are learning from what their experience actually is. In addition a climate should be developed in which I can demand evidence and respect for the value of rigorously gathered and analysed evidence (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:26).

Observation data may come from a professional journal, case study notes, reports, papers, meeting records, and more conventional planned sources like interviews, surveys, participant observation, etc.

### *Reflecting*

This stage involves the researcher reflecting on the results of the evaluation as well as on the way the whole action and research process went (making sense of evidence). It takes account of the variety of perspectives possible in the social situation and comprehends the issues and circumstances under which they arise. Reflection may, in turn, lead to the identification of a new problem or problems and hence, a new cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting begins.

Reflection is usually aided by discussion amongst participants. Group reflection leads to the reconstruction of the meaning of the social situation and provides the basis for the revised plan (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:13). In the process, the language and discourse of participants change.

But how compatible are such personal, and political commitments, as contained in this form of research, with the traditional research values? It is worthwhile to investigate some key points of critique against action research.

## **DEALING WITH CRITIQUE**

### **Relativism**

Huberman (1996:130) points out the postmodernism paradigm rejects the deliberate abuse of power by researchers of all kinds. But at the same time it supports a relativist epistemological territory where findings are illusory. They are in essence the projections of their authors' states of mind. All research relationships between researchers and their informants are "mutable, negotiable, and inseparable from researchers' instruments, observations and findings". This may even make the official recognition of teacher research more difficult for example, as it is not just a technical enterprise, but is also inextricably linked to personal experience, emotional life, interpersonal dynamics and, in its rendering, to self-disclosure. Huberman (1996:124) sees teacher research moving in several streams from critical theory to hermeneutics or, for the less conceptually defined streams, from self-discovery to emancipation, to interpersonal disclosure to radical institutional change.

### **Objectivity, rigour and theory**

Hodgekinson (1957) lodges a scathing attack on action research. It would appear that in an era where most research was still fundamentally scientific in nature, it would be obvious that action research be attacked in this way. He agrees that cooperation in the form of group interaction or group dynamics has become one of the most important characteristics of action research, but warns that these techniques may suffer procedural problems due to a lack of familiarity with the basic techniques of research. Action researchers may claim the banner of research while they have insufficient statistical knowledge. In true traditional and aloof style, Hodgekinson expresses his feeling that research is no place for the amateur. The method of science was adopted by professional students of education and not by practitioners. But working from an intersubjective perspective towards change in practice, one should expect to get the following comment from traditional researchers: "The information wasn't objective ... They had discussed it in a group so they biased each other .... It wasn't scientifically collected" (Maguire 1993:170).

Maclure and Bassey (1991:205) point out another difference. For participative action research, selection criteria are not so "clearcut". Although the criteria of clarity and rigour should be retained, standards used to assess conventional research proposals are not likely to illuminate all the relative merits of prospective participative action research projects. Some



critics doubt the lack of theory building in action research. Grundy and Kemmis (1981) and Dick (1993) state that theory building in action research is not an immediate aim. There are also complaints of a lack of rigour with action research. However, Grundy and Kemmis (1981) see rigour assured by the close and careful interrelation of the four moments in the cycle of activities.

### **Scientific procedures sometimes claim more than they can do**

Foster (1972) points towards the suspicion that action researchers are short of reading. But this research approach does not discard thorough research into particular aspects of a problem. It only puts such views and results to the test of practical experience of participants. Within this critical situation, they are discarded or may be adopted as a basis for action. Action research also does not by nature attract the illiterate to apply methodology – rather it does not support the disabling of practitioners by the claims that only academics or established researchers can do research.

### **Participation as ambiguous**

Maclure and Bassey (1991:202) sound a warning, based on their experience in Africa, regarding the issue of participation. From an African perspective, there is a cultural ambiguity around participation. From a Western perspective, participation involves an open exchange of ideas, sanctions the right to question, and legitimates the prerogative to be different, to conduct experiments and to make mistakes. But in many rural regions of sub-Saharan Africa, direct questioning and open dialogue amongst different subgroups are shunned. Thus, deciding on participation in a community improvement project may involve negotiating involvement from the very start.

Although scientific research claims that intricate and complex procedures can be the only solution, enough evidence has been provided by action researchers that traditional social science did not do enough to improve the situation for the majority of its subjects - even worse, these subjects remained untouched by the research. Action research can be considered an enabling science - this methodology creates trust, openness, and willingness to inquire into and reach joint solutions through the development of co-appreciative relationships (Pasmore & Friedlander 1982:347).

### **COMMITMENTS IN ACTION RESEARCH**

Having taken care of critique it is important to highlight key commitments in the action research process. Those who accept an action research methodology are committing themselves to a political process of change and involvement. This may not be pleasant at times, but through perseverance, they should be able to start making a difference in practice. Teaching staff should be able to provide rationales for their practice, and should continuously revisit these rationales as the reality of the institutional changes.

For Henry and Kemmis (1985:3) and McTaggart (1991:179) undertaking action research aims at giving a reasoned justification of our educational work to others - "to create a developed, tested and critically-examined rationale for what we are doing". Action research is in essence a systematic learning process (Henry & Kemmis 1985:3). When we are doing action research, we should constantly ask ourselves whether our action research project is helping all of us to improve the extent to which we are living our educational values. The action research process is committed to understanding and improvement towards change (Brock-Utne 1980:10-15) and to not becoming stagnated in "things that work". In this regard McTaggart (1991:180) does not see action research as only solving problems in educational practice, but also as posing problems on the nature of practice. The practitioner should therefore also be committed to problematise aspects of his practice that he wasn't aware of as being problematic.

It is important that the research process, being a learning process as well, becomes a program of education. Participants should become enlightened about the contradictions that have developed historically and address these through increases in understanding and self-awareness (Comstock 1982:385).

## **ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS**

Action research, being systematic in its own way, demands attention to certain essential elements to initiate is successfully.

### **How it originates**

Anders (1966) lists some guiding characteristics of action research:

- springs from an idea
- leads to a specific question
- depends upon a systematic activity
- is intended to produce some illumination of individual problems.

### **Minimum requirements**

Grundy and Kemmis (1981) pose the following minimum requirements for action research:

- subject matter as social practice
- spiral of cycles as constituting a systematic process
- involves everybody and widening participation
- maintains collaborative control of the process.

### **A thematic concern**

The collective construction of a thematic concern, around which the research is focussed, is an essential step. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:26) see the work on the thematic concern as an effort that will serve also to hold the group together. This thematic concern should integrate all the questions that participants can identify initially (Maclure & Basse 1991:206). These questions should imply some shared understanding of what is happening already, and how it is historically founded. Also, identifying current rationales for action is important. Deciding on a thematic concern also requires a judgement about what might be done to improve matters and monitoring such improvement. In the long run, it envisages "an evolution of understanding in concert with the improvement of practice as collective action is implemented and refined in practice" (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:19).

Understanding social action - in this case the practice of the educator - is linked to investigating how current language establishes itself into discourse, how activities relate to established practice and how organisational structures are supported by institutional relationships (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:41). These three dyads are interrelated in the world of practice and the world of work. For Kemmis and McTaggart (1988:43), "a critical analysis of our work involves seeing these relationships as changing over time (through history) and as elements in the dialectic of institutionalisation and contestation. We need to be able to describe these changes and contests, to describe the evolution of our work".

### **Collaboration**

As the research process progresses, it is recommended that you arrange for supportive work-in-progress discussions. Educational change is a slow process and may require individual change and group change which can be very difficult to integrate. The aim should be to involve everybody towards shared responsibility. All participants need to share responsibility for the process and they should all become critical friends in the process. You will have to

show all stakeholders that you are indeed making progress, so it is recommended that you communicate progress to everybody on a regular basis. If necessary, you will have to organise events through which any success up to that point is legitimised.

### **Research instruments**

Any research instrument used must be the object of the critical evaluation of all who come into contact with it (Brock-Utne 1980:10-15). Such instruments should be evaluated according to their capacity to increase self-knowledge and should not be the cause of division between the researcher (or research coordinator) and the participants. Phases in action research cycles demand quick feedback to participants and instruments should be able to realise this prerequisite.

Time should be set aside to write up all possible details of the process (Bonser & Grundy 1988:43). Oberg (1990:214) recommends that action researchers keep a journal because it can be a handy tool for uncovering the facts of the situation. As the research progresses, the action researcher will reflect continuously and ask himself questions (eg Who am I?), which can be addressed in the journal. Essentially the journal should contain descriptions from daily practice, analyses of decisions and reasoning, assumptions revealed and reconsideration of practice. Journal writers in this process can express the story of their professional lives in their journals in this way (Oberg 1990:218).

### **The role of the researcher**

It is recommended that before the research process starts, the philosophy and methods of action research be explained to your first core group of participants. Should any data gathering techniques be used later on during observation phases, it would be advantageous to explain these techniques and provide sufficient training (Pasmore & Friedlander 1982:348; Brock-Utne 1980:10-15). Participants should also be prepared to operate in groups and trust should be established. For this to be possible, the researcher's position needs to be properly explained, and his commitment towards the well being of all participants should be clear (Maclure & Basse 1991:206).

### **Starting small**

Henry and Kemmis (1985:2-3) and McTaggart (1991:175) recommend that action research should be started on a very small scale. This would mean that initial cycle activity would be small and that groups of participants would also be small. This would develop into bigger cycles and eventually a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, and then replanning (Comstock 1982; Henry & Kemmis 1985; McTaggart 1991; Fenton 1985; Griffiths & Davies 1993, Bravette 1996; McNaughton 1996; Henry & Henry 1982; Guevara 1996). These spirals find participants involved in self-critique and collective assessment of current practice and implemented practice. The action research process is about flexibility and adaptation. Initial plans and successive steps will therefore be modified in the light of experience. Each critically informed action step will conserve the strengths of previous steps and reach out further towards improvement and understanding (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988:20).

### **Reconnaissance**

McTaggart (1991:175) recommends that you start by collecting some initial data of interest - this is the very initial step of reconnaissance. Then you continue by getting a small action research group (a nucleus of enthusiasts) together and you participate yourself - be a model learner. Action research is systematic and should be organised well - this is important from the start. He suggests that you get things started by arranging an initial launch and then negotiate meeting times with your core group. Next you implement some exploratory change. After having reflected, plan for real change. Alder and Sandor (1990:42) consider an initial group of eight people to be of a particular advantage. It is a size that facilitates the feeling of a

team. In addition it facilitates group decision-making and feedback, and it enables all participants to be involved in all aspects of the research.

## CONCLUSION

Action research is concerned with change in practice, and eventually structural change, in the educational workplace - its emphasis is indeed on action during the research process. In this regard there is no separation between subjects or participants, and research and implementation. It is a methodology that is profoundly intersubjective and as such challenges the educational researcher-practitioner to "play with open cards". Hidden motives or disinterested attitudes do not serve this methodology to any extent. It is challenging in that it provides no security from introspection or self-criticism, and it comes dangerously close to putting the practitioner in confrontation with policies and systems - it has an essential political moment.

This methodology promises a framework for South African practitioners to systematically reflect on practice and to implement appropriate action in their respective workplaces to the advantage of all stakeholders. The successful implementation of educational policies or prescriptions can really be put to the test "in the classroom" as they may come from the marble corridors of central planning agencies - in fact such policies should be informed by the action research of groups of stakeholders in the field.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Japie Heydenrych is an online learning developer at the Bureau for University Teaching at Unisa. He holds a M Phil (cum laude) in philosophy from the University of Stellenbosch and has qualifications in Designing Training for the Internet and Technology Based Distributed Learning from the Open University of the United Kingdom and the University of British Columbia, Canada. His main research interest lies in the changing of practice and systems when implementing the online learning community, and he is currently a D Ed candidate at Deakin University in Australia.

