

Getting started with action research in your classroom

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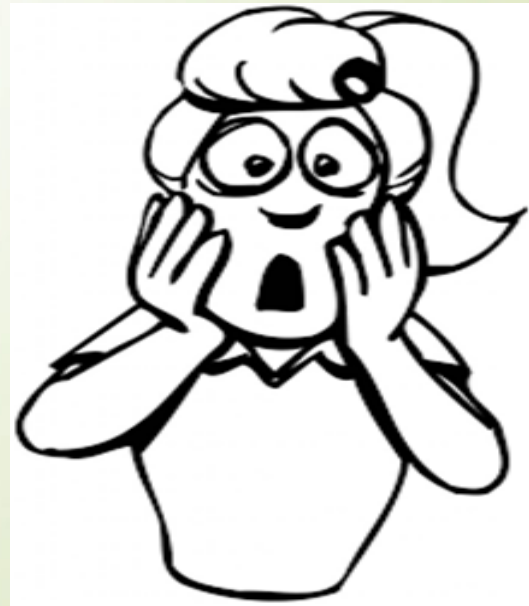


Why should teachers do action research?



I'm a teacher not a researcher!!

- Teachers are trained to teach!
- Teachers are far too busy teaching students
- Teachers are interested in practical classroom things...not theory!
- I don't get paid to do research!
- Teachers shouldn't be experimenting on their students!
- Research? That's scary!!!!



Action research?

So, what's in it for teaching practitioners?



What teachers say about AR

“AR encourages teachers to reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained.” (Australia)

“I will continue doing AR. I have no doubt about the advantages of an AR approach for my teaching although it is also not easy to conduct it consistently”.” (Indonesia)

“The action research model gave me the courage to cross the border from technician to professional.” (USA)



What is action research?

- What does action research mean?
- What do you already know about it?
- Have you tried it out before? On your own?
With others?



So what is action research?

AR involves a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community.

The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice. Action research is underpinned by democratic principles in that the ownership of change is invested in those who conduct the research.

(Burns, cited in Cornwell, 1999, p.5)

Locating action research (Adapted from Zeni, 1998)

Quantitative

Qualitative

‘Traditional’ research

Outsider: researcher investigating teachers’ practices

Classroom experiment

(Techniques of natural science/agriculture)

(control/experimental groups, inferential statistics)

Classroom ethnography/case study

(Techniques of anthropology)

(observation, interview)

Goal: To analyse/measure

Goal: To document

someone else’s teaching/learning

Action research

Insider: researcher documenting their own practices

Classroom experimentation

(Techniques of descriptive statistics)

(surveys, small-n statistics, test scores, word counts)

Classroom ethnography

(Techniques of case study, autobiography)

(observation, interview, journals, self-reflection)

**Goal: To understand/change/improve/develop
participants (teacher/students/others) teaching and learning**



What AR does not typically do

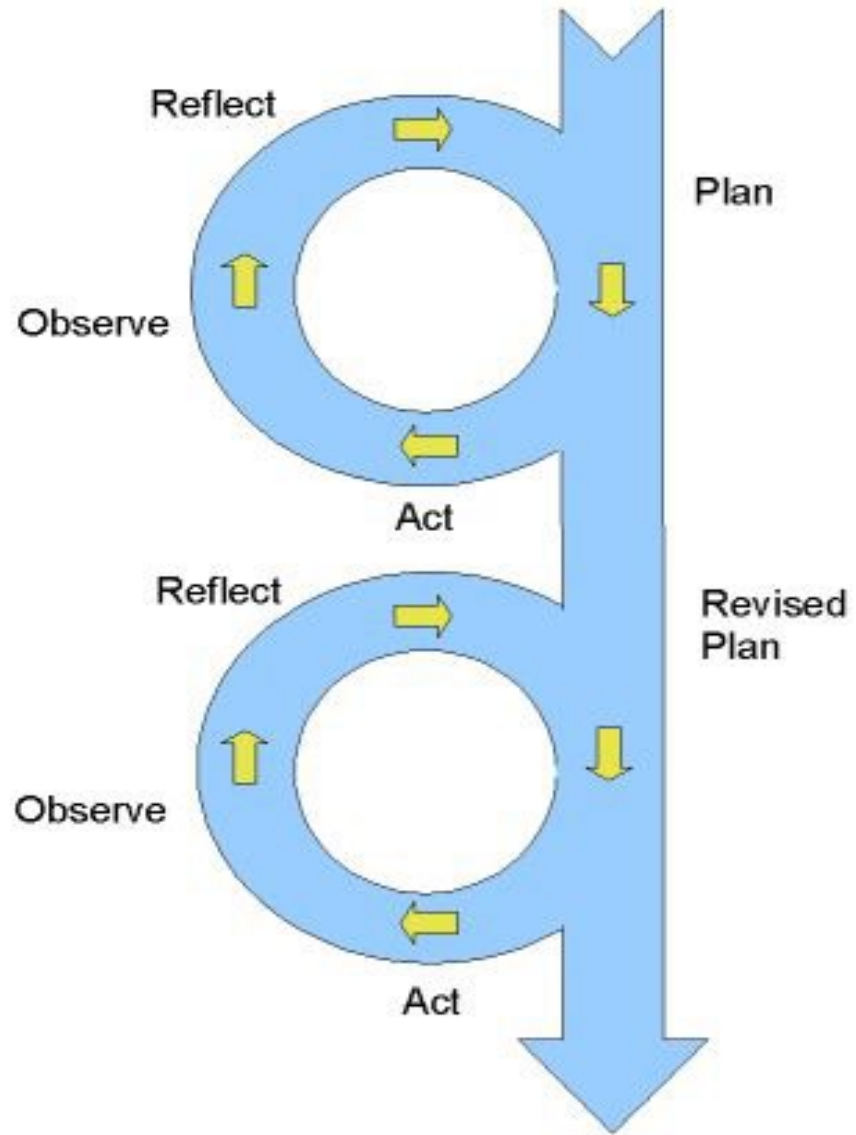
- ▶ Set out to prove/disprove an experimental hypothesis
- ▶ Establish control/experimental groups
- ▶ Draw on pre-test/post-test methods in the experimental sense
- ▶ Emphasise inferential statistical analyses
- ▶ Produce generalisable findings

In other words, AR is *exploratory* research, not research in the positivist, experimental tradition



How does AR differ from other research?

- It is research *with* people not *on* people
- Conducted in a specific social situation
- The teacher is a direct participant in the research (actor + researcher)
- It deliberately intervenes in the research situation to achieve understanding/change
- It is “subjective” rather than “objective”
- It produces local *theories for practice* rather than generalisable findings





So, how do we do AR?

- **Plan** - develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening
- **Act** - act to implement the plan
- **Observe** - observe the effects of the action in the context in which it occurs
- **Reflect** - reflect on these effects to produce further plans and actions, through a succession of cycles.

(Based on Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988)

Finding a focus for AR

The first step is to find your general focus or topic.

Have you had a teaching dilemma, problem or puzzle in mind for some time?






Finding a focus for AR

What topic(s) are you interested in researching?

How did you identify these topics?

Why are they of interest to you?





Think about the scope of your research

Ask yourself:

- ▶ Am I interested in individuals or groups?
- ▶ What resources will I have? (time, materials, resources, funding?)
- ▶ Who else do I need to include (managers, administrators, colleagues, students, former students)?
- ▶ What ethical issues must I consider?


Considering ethical issues

You should inform students and get their permission to be involved

What happens if they refuse to be involved?

You can still conduct your research, but should not include those students or data from them.





Refining your focus and developing questions

Questions should be:

- ▶ Clear: unambiguous and understandable
- ▶ Specific: can see how to answer them
- ▶ Answerable: can see what data are needed
- ▶ Relevant: worthwhile for the context
- ▶ Interconnected: form a coherent whole

But...not all AR has to start with fully developed questions!



Deciding on your data sources

Consider your AR focus and questions:

- ▶ What are the main actions you will put in place?
- ▶ What data do you need to document the actions and answer your question(s)?
- ▶ What method(s) will you use for collecting the data?

Develop your plan of action and collect data

Two main sources of data collection:


Observational (what people do)

Non-observational (what people think)





Collecting observational data

- ▶ observation (watching a social situation)
 - ▶ observation notes (factual accounts of events)
 - ▶ recordings (audio or video, MP3, Web 2.0 tools)
 - ▶ transcripts (documenting interactions)
 - ▶ photographs (visual shots of context)
 - ▶ maps/diagrams (layout/interactions)
 - ▶ documents (materials, texts produced in context)
- 



Collecting non-observational data

- research journal/diary (recording ideas/thoughts)
- “jottings” (memory aids)
- surveys/questionnaires (closed, rank option, open questions)
- interviews (structured, semi/unstructured)
- narratives (autobiography/life history)
- discussions (conversations/focus groups)

[I have a] better awareness of students' needs and attitudes.

It's brought home to me how important it is that the students decide.



I'll keep the lines of communication open with students to better inform my teaching.

Teacher comments: The last word!

It's a wonderful opportunity to look at research in a practical way.



[I ended up with] more knowledge of learner autonomy and goal setting theories and research skills.

I've gained practical skills relating to how to set up and run a research study and I'm more familiar with AR as a research methodology.

My personal observations on how AR empowers teachers

- focuses on the participants in the social situation
- moves towards 'a better world' for Ts/Ss
- questions the status quo - greater awareness of assumptions that our shape teaching/learning in the social situation
- provides greater awareness of your own subjective, frames of reference
- encourages us to confront inequities in the system
- works to transform/improve the social situation



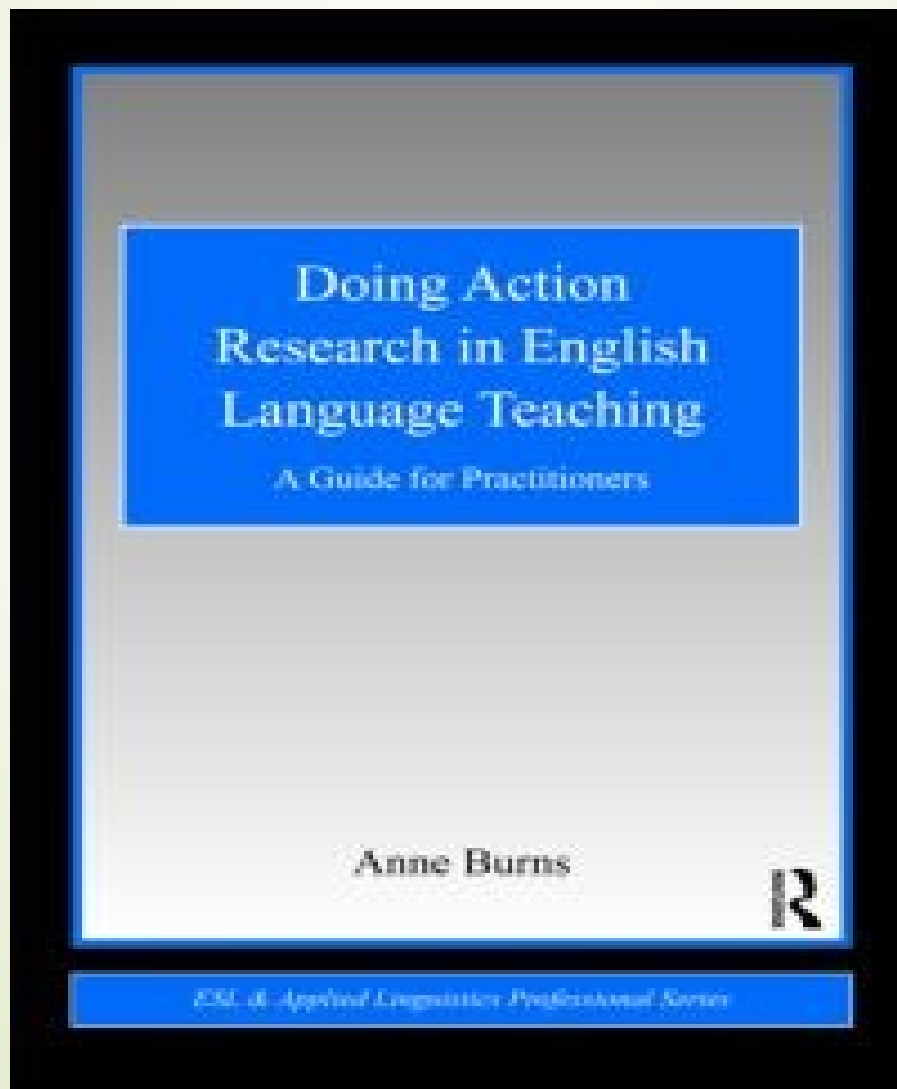


My favourite quote!

Being involved in action research works inside you like a vaccine. Once you have been vaccinated, you are [vaccinated] for life.

(Mariacarla - a teacher who worked with my colleague Graziella Pozzo in Italy).

A resource book for AR






To find out more

www.professoranneburns.com

There is a video on this website which explains the action research process and which relates to many of the issues that will be covered in the project workshops





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