**Chapter 3: Action Research for Lifelong Learning**

**Lecture Notes**

Kurt Lewin and John Dewey were important contributors to action research. Lewin’s emphasis on the relationships between research, theory, and action as well as Dewey’s view of people as problem solvers can be seen in action research. The role of bottom-up research like action research in educational science is emphasized. Types of action research are described in terms of the problems they focus on, the people involved in the research, and the outcomes of the research. The action research cycle includes reflect, plan, act, and observe phases. There is no starting point and action research is a recursive process. Strengths of action research include its emphasis on local issues, facilitation of lifelong learning, integration of theory and practice, empowerment of practitioners, support of democratic social change, and improvement of practitioner’s practices. Weaknesses of action research relate to less scientific rigor in measurement, design, and validity; generalization problems; an inability to determine cause and effect in some cases; small-scale studies; and difficulties involved in IRB approval.

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to help students become familiar with action research in terms of its theoretical background, research designs, process, strengths, and weaknesses. The goals of this chapter are to get students thinking as action researchers, to develop an appreciation for this applied type of research, and potentially to help them think about action research they could carry out as either part of their practice as educators or to meet program or degree requirements.

**Defining Action Research**

Action research:

* Combines research and action.
* Generates knowledge.
* Can lead to changes in practices.
* Is a way to try out new things to see if they work.
* Involves thinking like a practitioner and a researcher.
* Is focused on finding real-world solutions to real-world problems.
* Involves a continuous process of developing theories, testing them, and integrating the theory with practice.

**Origins of Action Research**

Kurt Lewin is considered the “father of action research.”

* Coined the term “action research.”
* His own work involved the integration of local and national issues.
* Believed that research and theory should be connected and should lead to action focused on social improvement.
* Force Field Theory (see Figure 3.1 in textbook)
  + We tend not to change much in our lives because we are in a state of *quasi-stationary equilibrium* due to *driving forces* (forces for change) and *restraining forces* (forces against change) being equally powerful.
  + Driving and restraining forces can be: physical, psychological, group, and other types of forces
  + A force field analysis identifies driving and restraining forces so you can increase driving forces and decrease restraining forces.
* Change Theory (see Figure 3.1 in textbook)
  + Change involves three phases:
    - *Unfreezing*—name and remove restraining forces, usually the most difficult phase.
    - *Changing*—creating a situation where driving forces are greater than restraining forces.
    - *Refreezing*—being in a new state of equilibrium.

John Dewey also contributed to action research.

* Pragmatist: People are always working toward changing our world by
  + Observing the consequences of our actions.
  + Determining what works in specific situations
  + Behaving in ways to bring about what we value and believe with improve our world.
* Problematic situations lead to doubt which leads to thinking planning about actions that will restore equilibrium between beliefs and environment.
  + Every person engages in experimentation in daily life (home, school, work, and social interactions)
* Scientific method—inquiry which is something people have always done and will continue to do
* Five phases of inquiry
  + A sense that there is a difficulty or that something is wrong
  + Naming the problem: location and definition
  + Hypothesis of possible solution
  + Reasoning around the solution
  + Testing of the solution by experimentation or observation
* Change is never permanent. There is a need for continuous improvement.

**Basic Scientific Research versus Action Research**

Basic scientific research and action research can be compared in terms of the type of research that is conducted, the knowledge that is gained, the applicability of the information, who conducts the research and the nature of the research. This is summarized below.

***Basic Scientific Research***

* Basic research
* Goal is scientific knowledge
* Generalized information
* Academic researchers
* Top-down

*Action Research*

* Applied research
* Goal is local knowledge
* Particular information
* Local practitioners
* Bottom-up

Both types of research have a place in education science. Figure 3.2 emphasizes this concept.

**Types of Action Research**

This section describes the different types of action research. The types are not mutually exclusive but differ in their emphases.

* Participatory Action Research (PAR)
  + Multiple people (parties, stakeholders) work together as a research team.
  + Issues of relinquishing power.
  + Each person contributes to the whole.
  + Researchers are also the participants in the research.
  + Dissemination should be taken seriously by all involved.
* Critical Action Research (CAR)
  + Similar to PAR and terms may be used as synonyms.
  + Emphasis on political issues, empowerment, immediate social change.
  + Ideological component similar to orientational research.
  + Focus on inequalities due to individual or group characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, disability, etc.).
* Feminist Action Research (FAR)
  + Similar to CAR.
  + Focused on viewing the world through a feminist point of view.
* Action Science
  + Research in organizations.
  + Focused on making organization a learning organization.
    - Learning organization: members continue to learn, develop, and grow so that the organization is continuously improving and adapting to the environment as it changes.
  + “Science of practice.”
  + More emphasis on scientific rigor and getting people in the organization to work together and grow over time.
  + Attempt to get organizations to use *double-loop learning* (places learning in context of larger system) rather than *single-loop learning* (focusing on fixing problems in the short-term but does not take a system-wide view).
    - Double-loop learning transforms organizations.
* Appreciative Inquiry (AI)
  + Finding the best in selves and others.
  + Work together to jointly develop and share a purpose, vision, and goal.
  + 4 phases
    - Discovery—identify and appreciate strengths, discover potential
    - Dream—develop vision through sharing and revising
    - Design—determine organization structure to attain vision
    - Destiny—enact new design and sustain momentum
* Differing scopes of Action Research
  + Individual Action Research
    - One researcher does everything
  + Collaborative Action Research
    - Team of researchers with complementary strengths who all contribute to the study
  + System wide Action Research
    - Focused on changing something large (e.g., school, school district)

**The Cycle of Action Research**

The Cycle of Action Research is depicted in Figure 3.3

* There is neither specific beginning nor ending point in the Cycle of Action Research. Action research is typically an iterative process whereby completing one cycle provides the impetus for the beginning of another cycle.
  + This is why action research is associated with lifelong learning and reflective practitioners.
* The Phases of the Cycle of Action Research
  + Planning Phase
    - Problem definition
    - Generate solutions from research literature, others
    - “Who does what, when chart”
    - Action plan
    - Ethical and feasible idea?
  + Action Phase
    - Change something
    - Develop measurement strategy and research design
    - Stick to plan and record deviations
    - Typically begin with small experiment or pilot study
  + Observe Phase
    - Data collection with multiple qualitative and quantitative sources
    - Look out for unintended outcomes
  + Reflection Phase
    - Interpret information and draw conclusions
    - Revise theory as needed
    - Plan next step

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Action Research**

* Strengths
  + Conducted by practitioners
  + Leads to lifelong learning
  + Involves integration of theory and practice
  + Leads to democratic social change
  + Leads to practitioner-contributed knowledge
  + Acknowledges intricacies of local situations
  + Improves of local practices
* Weaknesses
  + Small scale information and knowledge
  + Generalization problems
  + Less objectivity
  + Weaker research designs
  + Difficult to make cause and effect conclusions
  + Less measurement and validity rigor
  + IRB approval difficulties