Lecture Notes

# Chapter 3: Action Research for Lifelong Learning

## Learning Objectives

* 1. Define action research and describe its origins.
  2. Contrast the different types of action research.
  3. Describe Lewin’s change theory.
  4. Describe Dewey’s approach to inquiry.
  5. Explain the Cycle of Action Research.
  6. Compare the strengths and weaknesses of action research.
  7. State a problem at your workplace that can be addressed via action research.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses action research in terms of its theoretical background, research designs, process, strengths, and weaknesses. Students are guided toward 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.

## Annotated Chapter Outline

1. Introduction
   1. 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.
2. Defining Action Research: Action research is focused on solving specific problems local practitioners face in their workplaces and communities.
   1. **Action Research**: Studies that focus on solving practitioners’ local problems.
      1. **Action Research Attitude:** valuing and thinking like a practitioner and researcher in your job and life.
      2. Combines research and action
      3. Generates knowledge
      4. Can lead to changes in practices
      5. Is a way to try out new things to see whether they work
      6. Is focused on finding real-world solutions to real-world problems
      7. Involves a continuous process of developing theories, testing them, and integrating the theory with practice
      8. Discussion Question: Discuss the strengths of action research
3. Origins of Action Research: Kurt Lewin is considered the “father of action research”
   1. Kurt Lewin
      1. Coined the term “action research”
      2. His own work involved the integration of local and national issues.
      3. Believed that research and theory should be connected and should lead to action focused on social improvement.
      4. **Force Field Theory** (see Figure 3.1 in textbook): explanation of action and inaction as resulting from driving and restraining forces
         1. 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.
         2. Driving and restraining forces can be physical, psychological, group, and other types of forces
         3. **Driving forces:** forces pushing for changes from the current state
         4. **Restraining forces:** forces resisting change and supporting the status quo
         5. **Force field analysis**: Identifying and understanding driving and restraining forces in a situation so you can increase driving forces and decrease restraining forces.
      5. **Change Theory** (see Figure 3.1 in textbook): A detailed theory of change that includes a three-step process for planned changes in human settings
         1. Change involves three phases:
         2. Unfreezing--name and remove restraining forces, usually the most difficult phase
         3. Changing--creating a situation where driving forces are greater than restraining forces
         4. Refreezing--being in a new state of equilibrium
   2. John Dewey also contributed to action research.
      1. Pragmatist: People are always working toward changing our world by
         1. Observing the consequences of our actions.
         2. Determining what works in specific situations
         3. Behaving in ways to bring about what we value and believe with improve our world
      2. Problematic situations lead to doubt that leads to thinking planning about actions that will restore equilibrium between beliefs and environment.
         1. Every person engages in experimentation in daily life (home, school, work, and social interactions)
         2. People are problem solvers
      3. Scientific method--inquiry that is something people have always done and will continue to do
      4. **Deweyan inquiry**: Problem-solving that relies on reflection, observation, and experimentation.
      5. Five phases of inquiry
         1. An indeterminate situation in which a difficulty is felt: a sense that there is a difficulty or that something is wrong
         2. The institution of a problem: its location and definition
         3. Hypothesis of possible solution
         4. Reasoning around the solution
         5. Testing of the solution by experimentation or observation
      6. Change is never permanent. There is a need for continuous improvement.
      7. Discussion question: compare and contrast Lewin’s and Dewey’s theories.
4. Basic Scientific Research Versus Action Research: action research is applied, focused on local concerns
   1. Characteristics of Scientific Research
      1. Goal is to produce scientific knowledge
      2. Find principles that generalize
   2. Characteristics of Action Research
      1. Applied research
      2. Not concerned with generalization
      3. Typically functions at the local (bottom) level (Figure 3.2) but also should be disseminated to more general levels so it can be included in theory.
   3. Both types of research have a place in education science
      1. Figure 3.2 emphasizes this.
      2. **Translational research:** Students focused on converting scientific research into easily understood language and procedures.
      3. Discussion question: have students generate questions to be answered by basic scientific research and action research
5. Types of Action Research: There are multiple types of action research that are not mutually exclusive and they differ in their emphases.
   1. **Participatory Action Research** (PAR): Studies in which team members jointly frame and conduct research, producing knowledge about a shared problem.
      1. Multiple people (parties, stakeholders) work together as a research team.
      2. Issues of relinquishing power
      3. Each person contributes to the whole.
      4. Researchers are also the participants in the research.
      5. Dissemination should be taken seriously by all involved.
   2. **Critical Action Research (CAR):** An openly transparent form of ideology-driven research designed to emancipate and reduce oppression of disadvantaged groups in society.
      1. Similar to PAR and terms may be used as synonyms.
      2. Emphasis on political issues, empowerment, immediate social change.
      3. Ideological component similar to orientational research.
      4. Focus on inequalities due to individual or group characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, disability, etc.).
   3. **Feminist Action Research (FAR):** Studies that provide a feminist lens to help eliminate various forms of sexism and empower women in society.
      1. Similar to CAR
      2. Focused on viewing the world through a feminist point of view
   4. **Action Science**: the science of practice, with the aim of making theories in use explicit and producing a learning organization
      1. Research in organizations
      2. Focused on making organization a learning organization
      3. **Learning organization**: Organization in which members work together to grow over time, continually improving the organization as a whole.
      4. “Science of practice”
      5. To bring about change action science needs to understand
         1. **Espoused theory:** The theory or explanation we provide for our actions.
         2. **Theory in use:** The theory or explanation that explains what we actually do.
      6. More emphasis on scientific rigor and getting people in the organization to work together and grow over time.
      7. Attempt to get organizations to use **double-loop learning** (learning how a problem relates to the system it resides in so that a more satisfying solution can be found; places learning in context of larger system) rather than **single-loop** **learning** (fixing a small problem to get the immediately desired result, does not take a system-wide view).
      8. Double-loop learning transforms organizations.
   5. **Appreciative Inquiry** (AI): Finding the best in organization members and working with them to achieve a jointly constructed and shared purpose.
      1. Finding the best in selves and others.
      2. Work together to jointly develop and share a purpose, vision, and goal.
      3. Four phases (the “4 Ds”
         1. Discovery--identify and appreciate strengths, discover potential
         2. Dream--develop results-oriented vision through sharing and revising
         3. Design--determine organization structure needed to attain vision
         4. Destiny--enact new design/structure and sustain momentum over time
   6. Differing scopes of Action Research
      1. **Individual Action Research:** Action research that is planned, designed, and conducted by on primary person
         1. One researcher does everything.
      2. **Collaborative Action Research:** An action research study in which a team designs and enacts research on one part of an organization.
         1. Team of researchers with complementary strengths who all contribute to the study.
      3. System wide Action Research: An action research study in which all organization members work to produce system-wide change.
         1. Focused on changing something large (e.g., school, school district)
   7. Discussion question: discuss when each of the specific types of action research might be more applicable than other types of action research
6. The Cycle of Action Research
   1. The Cycle of Action Research is depicted in Figure 3.3.
   2. 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.
      1. This is why action research is associated with lifelong learning and reflective practitioners.
   3. The Phases of the Cycle of Action Research
   4. **Planning Phase:** Articulation of the action research project plan
      1. Problem definition
      2. **Critical friend:** A person whom you trust to be open, honest, and constructively critical of your work.
   5. Generate solutions from research literature, others
      1. “**Who does what, when chart**”: A useful chart showing what is to occur during the study.
      2. **Action plan**: A synonym for the research proposal that is used by action researchers
      3. Ethical and feasible idea?
   6. **Action Phase:** Step in the action research cycle in which one conducts an exploratory-descriptive study or an experimental-intervention study
      1. Change something
      2. Develop measurement strategy and research design
      3. Stick to plan and record deviations
      4. Typically begin with small experiment or pilot study
   7. **Observe Phase:** A step in the action research cycle in which one collects data and obtains evidence about the success of actions.
      1. Data collection with multiple qualitative and quantitative sources
      2. Look out for unintended outcomes
   8. **Reflection Phase:** Step in the action research cycle in which one thinks about the results, considers strategies for improvement, and begins future planning.
      1. Interpret information and draw conclusions
      2. Revise theory as needed
      3. Plan next step
   9. Discussion question: have students describe the phases of the action research cycle in their own words
7. Strengths and Weaknesses of Action Research
   1. Strengths
      1. Conducted by practitioners
      2. Leads to lifelong learning
      3. Involves integration of theory and practice
      4. Leads to democratic social change
      5. Leads to practitioner-contributed knowledge
      6. Acknowledges intricacies of local situations
      7. Improves of local practices
   2. Weaknesses
      1. Small-scale information and knowledge
      2. Generalization problems
      3. Less objectivity
      4. Weaker research designs
      5. Difficult to make cause-and-effect conclusions
      6. Less measurement and validity rigor
      7. IRB approval difficulties
   3. Discussion question: ask students to give examples of the strengths and weakness of action research
8. Action Research Journaling
   1. To become a better practitioner and researcher record thinking/reflections as each chapter is read
   2. **Action research journal:** A place where one records learnings and reflections.
   3. Discussion question: discuss what students will include in their Action Research Journal for Chapter 3.