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Introduction

What Is an Action Research Dissertation?

Dissertations in the social sciences are not what they used to be. Before the advent of more qualitative and action-oriented research, advice on how to do the standard five-chapter dissertation was fairly clear. Students were advised to begin in linear fashion, producing the first three chapters for the proposal defense and then adding a chapter to report findings and another for implications and recommendations after the data were gathered and analyzed. The qualitative dissertation, with its more emergent design and narrative style, challenged the notion that three completed chapters could be defended as a proposal or that five chapters were enough to effectively “display” qualitative data. Over the past 30 years, dissertation committees and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) have become more tolerant of the unique needs of qualitative researchers.

The action research dissertation is the new kid on the block, and it is coming under intense scrutiny by both dissertation committees and IRBs. While action research shares some similarities with qualitative research (and even quantitative research), it is different in that research participants themselves either are in control of the research or are participants in the design and methodology of the research. In fact, many action researchers argue that action research—and participatory action research, in particular—is less a methodology than an orientation or stance toward the research process and the participants (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Committee members and IRBs are often stymied by the cyclical nature of action research as well as its purposes, which transcend mere knowledge generation to include personal and professional growth, and organizational and community empowerment. IRBs are confused about risk factors in settings in which research subjects are participants in the research at the same time that

they are, often, subordinates within the organizational settings. These power relations are further complicated when the action researcher is also an insider to the organization. Furthermore, action research often uses a narrative style that allows the researcher to reflect on the research process as well as the findings, which seldom can be easily formulated as propositional knowledge. Finally, action research has grown out of very different research traditions and has manifested itself differently in different disciplines and fields of study. In fact, action research is inherently interdisciplinary and seldom fits neatly into the norms of a particular discipline or field.

Historically, action researchers were academics or professional researchers who involved research participants in their studies to a greater extent than was typical with traditional research. In fact, some social scientists argue that participatory forms of action research are merely variants of applied research and that its difference consists merely of the degree to which participants are included (Spjelkavik, 1999). In some cases, participants are involved from the inception of the research to the writing and presentation of the final report. Increasing numbers of doctoral students in fields such as community psychology, social work, nursing, and international development want to do dissertation studies in which their outsider status is tempered by collaboration with insiders, and in which action is central to the research. Many action research dissertations that we will discuss in this book are of this type. However, as more working professionals have begun receiving doctoral degrees, there has been a tendency for action researchers to be insiders to their professional settings, making them at once both researcher and practitioner. This is particularly true of EdD (doctorate in education) programs, which have produced a significant number of dissertation studies in recent years done by organizational insiders. These practitioner researchers often want to study their own contexts because they want the research to make a difference in their own setting and sometimes, often mistakenly, because they think it will be more convenient and easier to do the study where they work.

THE MANY FACES OF ACTION RESEARCH

So what is action research? Perhaps its most important feature is that it shifts its locus of control in varying degrees from professional or academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of research. There are several terms in current use that describe research done either by or in collaboration with practitioners or community members. The most common ones are *action research*; *participatory action research (PAR)*; *practitioner research*; *YPAR*; *action science*; *collaborative action research*; *cooperative inquiry*; *educative research*; *appreciative inquiry*; *self-study*; *emancipatory praxis*; *community-based*

participatory research; teacher research; participatory rural appraisal; feminist action research; feminist, antiracist participatory action research; and advocacy activist, or militant research. As we will make clear in Chapter 2, each of these terms connotes different purposes, positionalities, epistemologies, ideological commitments, and, in many cases, different research traditions that grew out of very different social contexts.

We have chosen to use the term *action research* for this book for pragmatic and philosophical reasons. Pragmatically, it is probably the most generically used term in all disciplines and fields of study, so it serves as an umbrella term for the others. It also makes *action* central to the research enterprise and sets up nicely a tension with traditional research, which tends to take a more distanced approach to research settings. Much like those who study natural experiments, action researchers tend to study ongoing actions that are taken in a setting. Such action-oriented research would raise issues of reactivity for traditional researchers, both qualitative and quantitative. Traditional researchers see their impact on the setting either as positive (as using carefully planned and controlled treatments in an experimental design) or as negative (as contaminating or distorting ongoing events in a natural setting).

In some fields, such as education, nursing, and social work, the term *practitioner research* (or, more specifically, *teacher research, administrator research, etc.*) has gained popularity (particularly in the U.S.). This term implies that insiders to the setting are the researchers, whereas in other traditions of action research, the researcher is an outsider who collaborates to varying degrees with insider practitioners or community members. The term *action research* leaves the positionality (insider or outsider) of the researcher open. The term *practitioner researcher* places the insider/practitioner at the center of the research, but often tends to decenter other important stakeholders, such as clients and other community members. Because of this, many argue that action research should always be collaborative regardless of whether the researcher is an outsider or insider to the setting under study. We will return repeatedly to this issue of positionality throughout the book, because how action researchers position themselves vis-à-vis the setting under study will determine how one thinks about power relations, research ethics, and the validity or trustworthiness of the study's findings.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF ACTION RESEARCH

Although the plethora of terms coined to describe this research reflects wide disagreement on many key issues, most agree on the following: Action research is inquiry that is done *by* or *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken,

and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. What constitutes evidence or, in more traditional terms, data is still being debated. Action research is oriented to some action or cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a particular problematic situation. The idea is that changes occur within the setting or within the participants and researchers themselves.

Action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation. Collaboration for insiders involves seeking outsiders with relevant skills or resources (e.g., dissertation committees, methodology consultants), though most agree that the perceived need for change should come from within the setting. Even in a case in which a lone practitioner is studying his or her own practice, participation or at least ongoing feedback should be sought from other stakeholders in the setting or community to ensure a democratic outcome and provide an alternative source of explanations. The issue of collaboration and participation creates important tensions in the case of action research dissertations, because the culture of dissertations has traditionally discouraged collaborative work.

Like all forms of inquiry, action research is *value laden*. Although most practitioners or communities hope that action research will solve pressing problems or improve their practice, what constitutes improvement or a solution is not self-evident. It is particularly problematic in fields that do not have consensus on basic aims. Action research takes place in settings that reflect a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power. Here, the notion of reflexivity is crucial because action researchers must interrogate received notions of improvement or solutions in terms of who ultimately benefits from the actions undertaken.

Several more concise definitions exist in the body of literature on action research that has grown over the years. For example, McKernan (1988) described it as “a form of self-reflective problem solving, which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings” (p. 6). McCutcheon and Jung (1990) agree but add an emphasis on collaboration:

[Action research is] systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice. (p. 148)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1987), writing about education, add the goal of social justice to their definition of action research as

a form of *collective*, self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the

situations in which these practices are carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents, and other community members—any group with a shared concern. The approach is only Action Research when it is *collaborative*, though it is important to realize that the Action Research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of the individual group members. (p. 6)

Argyris and Schon (1991), who focus on organizational and professional development, describe the goals and methods of the action research tradition.

Action Research takes its cues—its questions, puzzles, and problems—from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It bounds episodes of research according to the boundaries of the local context. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them there through *intervention experiments*—that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desired change in the situation. (p. 86)

The double burden that the authors refer to is the concern with both action (improvement of practice, social change, and the like) and research (creating valid knowledge about social practice), and, according to the authors, this sets up a conflict between the rigor and the relevance of the research—a conflict that has been viewed as both an advantage and disadvantage by different commentators. Unlike much traditional social science research that frowns on intervening in any way in the research setting, action research demands some form of intervention. For the action researcher, these interventions constitute a spiral of action cycles in which one undertakes

1. to develop a *plan* of action to improve what is already happening;
2. to *act* to implement the plan;
3. to *observe* the effects of action in the context in which it occurs; and
4. to *reflect* on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and on, through a succession of cycles. (Kemmis, 1982, p. 7)

This cycle of activities forms an action research spiral in which each cycle increases the researchers' knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem, and, it is hoped, leads to its solution. Sometimes, these action cycles are completed in a matter of minutes since professionals are always planning and rethinking plans on the fly. Other times, action cycles may take days, weeks, or months.

We prefer to remain as eclectic as possible with regard to a definition of action research; however, the definition that a researcher chooses should be made clear in a dissertation. This definition will then determine the kinds of epistemological, ethical, and political decisions a researcher will have to make

throughout the dissertation study. Furthermore, we recommend that researchers make this decision-making process explicit in the dissertation itself, either in the body or in an appendix. Until action research is as well understood as traditional methodologies, such discussions may be needed to reassure (and educate) skeptical dissertation committee members.

THE ACTION RESEARCH DISSERTATION

Unfortunately, there is more writing *about* action research than documentation of actual research studies. This is, in part, because those who engage in action research projects are often more interested in generating knowledge that can be fed back into the setting under study than generating knowledge that can be shared beyond the setting. Drawing on Geertz's (1983) work on "local knowledge" in anthropology, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) make a distinction between the generation of local and public knowledge in action research. With reference to teachers, they use the term *local knowledge* "to signal both what teachers come to know about their own knowledge through teacher research and what communities of teacher researchers come to know when they build knowledge collaboratively" (p. 45). Thus, local knowledge is most often shared, if at all, with only an immediate community of practitioners or community members. It is meant to address the immediate needs of people in specific settings, and it is this utility of knowledge generated by action research that represents one of its major strengths.

The dissertation represents scholarship that generally makes knowledge claims that are generalizable, or transferable, beyond the immediate setting. This means that an action research study for a dissertation must consider how the knowledge generated can be utilized by those in the setting, as well as by those beyond the setting. While action research is seldom statistically generalizable, the knowledge it generates can be transferred beyond the research setting. This can be done in a number of ways. A dissertation may represent the documentation of a successful collaboration and be used as a case study of not only the process but also the product of the collaboration. This becomes public knowledge to the extent that the knowledge is transferred to someone in a receiving context that is similar (i.e., another battered women's shelter, another science classroom, another community, etc.) to the sending context that produced the study. Qualitative and case study researchers refer to this as the external validity, or *transferability*, of the findings.

Another way that knowledge is transferable is when dissertations generate new theory that can be used to help explain similar problems in other contexts. Anderson et al. (2007) describe an action research study by classroom teacher Cynthia Ballenger (1992; see also Ballenger, 1998) that informed and expanded

the existing theory base in early childhood literacy. She documented what she eventually called the *shadow curriculum*, a product of children's social networks in the classroom that supplements the enacted curriculum.

Action research can also result in products and instruments that can be used in other settings. Lynne Mock (1999), whose dissertation is discussed in Chapter 5, developed and validated the Personal Vision Scale to explore the concept of transformational leadership in a community setting. This scale, which assesses various stages in the leader's visioning process, can be used by other community groups in selecting and training community leaders.

Action research dissertations represent an important source of documentation of action research studies as well as knowledge about various social practices. The recent growth of doctorate in education (EdD) programs and programs for applied doctoral degrees in fields such as social work, nursing, and criminology has provided an important space for action research dissertations. Unfortunately, few academic faculty are trained in action research—even in applied fields—and thus lack the skills to guide students through the complex and messy process of action research. Ironically, many of the students in applied doctoral programs are working full time in organizations and communities while enrolled at the university. It is hard to imagine a better scenario for fostering action research, and yet few applied doctorate programs teach action research methods and even fewer PhD programs do. (For a further discussion of this problem, see Anderson, 2002; Anderson & Herr, 1999; on practitioner research for doctoral students, Drake & Heath, 2010.) Nevertheless, the number of action research courses in professional schools and applied fields appears to be growing. We hope this book will help both faculty and students think through the complex dilemmas that action research presents for master's theses and doctoral dissertations, as well as its wider dissemination through publication.