

## Doing Action Research ethically

Depending on which literature we use, Action Research may be defined in slightly different ways. Some researchers emphasise the iterative cycles of exploring an issue before developing, testing and evaluating an intervention. For others, following Paulo Freire's philosophy, Action Research is an opportunity to develop participatory approaches. They are therefore concerned less with iterations and interventions than with reducing the power dynamics between researchers and participants (Freire, 1982). And finally, there are researchers who adopt the living educational theory approach as outlined by Sumara and Carson (1997) and developed further by Barry (2012) and Whitehead (2018). These researchers foreground the practice within Action Research and see Action Research as synonymous with practice-based or practice-led research.

Although these variations of Action Research set different aims for their research and draw on different philosophies, ontologies and epistemologies, the basic principles are the same: close proximity to the research process, keen involvement in the research, and transformation. These foundational premises have a bearing on all forms of Action Research and raise ethical challenges that we must explore carefully.

### 1. Proximity to the research process

The researcher's closeness to the research process is usually a methodological advantage, as the researcher can build on their professional knowledge and expertise. In conventional research contexts, this professional experience is often not given sufficient credit. However, the risk with being too close to our research is that we may have tunnel vision and therefore

neglect or ignore what may lie outside our narrow field of vision. Not only is this a methodological issue, it is also an ethical one, in that we may be so involved in pursuing our research that we do not notice the impact our work has on the participants, for example. This closeness to the research also relates to the participants' involvement in the research process.

## 2. Keen involvement in the research

Participants are active stakeholders in Action Research, who often try and test different interventions. The advantage of involving those who are directly impacted by changes is obvious: we gain a first-hand insight into lived experience and we can make adaptations and improvements on-the-fly. However, through involving our participants that closely in the exploratory process we are effectively using them as guinea pigs. There is an argument to be made here that we should not experiment when we cannot be sure of an outcome, as the outcome may be negatively impacting the participants' experiences and learning, for example. This leads me to the final aspect: transformation.

## 3. Transformation

Most research is experienced as transformative by the researchers and by the participants, albeit to a lesser extent. The kind of transformation that Action Research seeks, however, is not minimal. When the transformation relates to a particular professional practice in teaching and learning contexts, it could be argued that a change for the better is always welcome. However, there may be significant risk involved in seeking transformation if an Action Research project deals with topics and themes such as identity, or sense of

belonging. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure participants do not come to harm, but can we truly anticipate all consequences of our endeavours?

Action Research is a powerful device in our methodological toolkit. Yet, for it to be done ethically, we do need to insist that researchers adhere to the foundations of good quality research: criticality, transparency, reflexivity (Leigh and Brown, 2021, 72f.).

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