

ACTION INQUIRY

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Three incidents —

1 I was being interviewed for a research project for which I had tendered with an action research approach. The interviewers said that they liked my proposal, but were concerned that I thought action research an appropriate method as it was quite clear that an outcome they required was 'properly researched conclusions'; they said it wasn't 'a personal development project'; they were unpersuaded by my assurances that action research would deliver research outcomes; they said they had seen a number of action research projects and all were purely concerned with professional development ... end of story for any action research in that project.

2 When working with some professional facilitators on what had been funded as an action research professional development project. When I began to raise research methodological questions and moved to introduce some research methods which I thought appropriate, they objected because they saw their job as being to help the teachers they were working with to improve their own practice, and formal research methods were not necessary for this; indeed, it was said that this was antithetical to the process because formal research methods belonged to the academic tradition which had an altogether different set of concerns.

3 I was listening to a group of social workers being introduced to action research. The facilitator made no mention of the idea of strategic action, or any kind of an *information getting* phase, let alone of any research processes. At the end of the presentation someone in the audience commented, "We do that all the time." The facilitator replied, "Yes, everyone who's working to improve their practice is using action research although they may not know it." The participant came back with, "So why are we all here, then?" And the response was, "Well, if we can see what we're doing we might be able to do it better." The questioner was unimpressed, knowing that he already had a good reflective process.

To me these incidents are symptomatic of an increasingly prevalent and acute problem with the method — the term 'action research' is being applied to any practice in which thought and action are related whether or not any kind of research is involved. Not only does this lead to many misunderstandings amongst action researchers themselves, but it makes the field appear chaotic, ill conceived, undisciplined and very suspect to many outsiders, particularly academics and project sponsors. Those researchers in Incident 1 dismissed the method as not being research; the facilitators in Incident 2 wanted to exclude research from the method; and the facilitator (and so also the participant) in *Incident 3* couldn't see that there was any difference between action research and business-as-usual professional practice. At a time when many action researchers are seeking to establish the process as practically sound and academically legitimate, these common misunderstandings are highly counter-productive.

I know that I am not alone in encountering all these attitudes, but there is little discussion of them in the literature. Elliott (1991) for instance, believes it helpful to collapse action research into the broader category of reflective practice, albeit specifically in the context of professional change. And whenever I've suggested that in order to deal with such problems we really had to define what was and what was not action research, I've got into some rather hot water. On an internet list recently, I was told that it was more important to decide between good and bad research than what kind of research was being performed. And at a recent conference it was suggested that, amongst other things my concern with definitions was a male preoccupation, the respondent saying that, being a woman and therefore less prescriptive, she would not say to anyone that what they were doing was not action research; rather ironically, she said she would just be interested in what the person was doing and would engage with that. I'm not going to argue the content of these positions as I think they miss the point; but they do suggest that I need to explain two issues relevant to defining action research.

First, we agree that there are issues of power in all defining; as Bell (1978:) pointed out nearly 20 years ago, '... the people who do the defining in our society are the powerful - with a little help from their friends, the social scientists'. And, as I've written elsewhere (Tripp, 1990a), that is precisely the process utilised by academics to exclude teachers from participation in the generation of knowledge about their own profession. That's an old injustice which I, for one, believe can be redressed through teacher action research. So the point that definitions are used by the powerful in their own interests is an important one, and we should therefore all be very wary; we should always ask who is defining what, how, why and in whose interests. But because definitions are dangerous that does not mean that we should never use them; rather that we should be cautious in their construction and use.

I believe I am being cautious about these definitions, and I do not see how defining action research would prevent certain people from doing it or exclude their work from the field. I believe definitions can be visionary, expansionary and inclusive, and the ideas in this paper must be judged by those criteria. In any case, I see this as part of a continuing scholarly discussion, and in the likely event that we cannot agree exactly what it is we are talking about, then at least we will have more ideas on the table than we did before, and we may be able see more clearly where, how and why we disagree. That seems to me to be a legitimate and productive reason for engaging in discussing some definitions. So although I agree that one cannot escape the power of a definition, this paper is not merely an attempt to exercise power, and it should not be dismissed out of hand simply because definitions are risky.

Second, there is another general problem of definitions; it is one in which Jackson (1992) seems to be caught up with regard to that other perennial problem, the meaning of the term 'curriculum'. It's an instance of what could pass for Tripp's law: the more you need something, the harder it is to get. Both curriculum and action research need clarification because they are so diverse, diffuse and confused; yet their very diversity, diffuseness and confusion render clarity extremely difficult. So Jackson, after a thorough historical description and contemporary analysis, decides not to attempt a single definition; but he seems to do so more from a sense of futility in the face of all the confusion and conflict surrounding the term, than from a sense that more agreement would not be useful. Furthermore, whilst he tries to clarify what curriculum means to different people without any attempt at control, he also recognises that we do invest words with meaning, and that although definitions are merely certain people's agreements about their meanings for a particular word, clarity is an essential aspect of scholarship.

So none of those problems with definitions lessen my conviction that we need to agree some definitions about action research, and to do so fast. As my recent experience shows, uncertainty about the nature, content and scope of the field leaves it open to erosion, not just because it is difficult to obtain positions and research funds for a diverse and amorphous idea, but also because lack of clear boundaries and the desire to increase the status of what one does encourages those working in related fields to claim that they also are 'doing' action research when in fact they are doing something else, such as reflective teaching or professional development.

Other researchers are not shy to establish clear definitions for their methods, which is probably why I've never yet met anyone trying to present a set of numerical survey results as an ethnography. But whilst we encourage anyone who uses any version of a plan, act, review cycle to term their work 'action research', the term will become increasingly meaningless and in the process impede the progress of many of our hopes and aspirations for the method. In the remainder of this brief paper I will therefore suggest some definitions that will enable people to distinguish action research from other methods in the same family.

ACTION INQUIRY

It is interesting that the difficulties mentioned above do not seem to prevent everyone else from inventing their own, or supporting particular definitions of others. It is outside the scope of this paper to survey them all here, but wherever I look in the literature I find a plethora of definitions quite as complex and varied as those for 'curriculum'. This is partly because most people concentrate on defining action research by itself, rather than first contextualising it in an overview of other terms in the field. So I think that one of our main difficulties in defining the various kinds of action research, action learning and reflective practice found in, for instance, Argyris and Schon (1989), Carr and Kemmis (1993), Dadds (1995), Elliott (1990), Forward (1989), Heron (1997), Hustler, et al. (1986), Marquardt (1999), Noffke and Stevenson (1995), Pollard and Tann (1993), Revons (1971), Selener (1992), Winter (1989), Zuber-Skerritt (1991), is that we do not have a generally agreed superordinate term in which they can be subsumed. In fact, Deshler and Ewert (1995), in a very comprehensive, thorough and open review of the field, see action research itself as the inclusive term in exactly the same way that we in Australia did a decade and a half ago —

Educational action research is a term used to describe a family of activities in curriculum development, professional development, school improvement programs, and systems planning and policy development. These activities have in common the identification of strategies of planned action which are implemented, and then systematically submitted to observation, reflection and change. (National Invitational Conference on Action Research, 1981)

It was useful at the time, but I now think that this definition of the term is a mistake as it turns action research from a process into a category of processes — or we have the nonsense that there is a kind of action research called action research. It is also difficult to see what one does with a process like action learning if action research is the category: how can action learning be a form of action research when 'learning' is broader than 'research'? Or if it's not a form of action research, then why does it employ exactly the same cycle? Furthermore, if any kind of reflection on action is

called action research, we risk rejection by the very people on whom most of us rely for funding our work because they already have a very clear idea about what constitutes research, and they simply assume that we don't know what research is.

It therefore seems necessary to use a superordinate term that would serve as a category to include any kind of inquiry into action in a field of practice, and I want to suggest the term 'action inquiry' for that.

Action Inquiry

Action Inquiry is an umbrella term for the deliberate use of any kind of a *plan, act, describe, review* cycle for inquiry into action in a field of practice with a view to improvement. Reflective practice, diagnostic practice, action learning, action research and researched action are all kinds of action inquiry.

The many forms of action inquiry

Clearly there are many forms of action inquiry, and some of them, like action research and action learning, have their own special names. Excluding *thoughtful action*, the following table shows 7 common varieties of action inquiry (read by line from left to right; their commonest starting points are in bold) —

	DESIGN	ACT	INQUIRE ← MONITOR REFLECT →	
THOUGHTFUL ACTION		<i>Do and Monitor</i>		
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE	Plan Re-plan	Do & Monitor		Reflect Reflect
ACTION RESEARCH	Strategic Plan Re-plan strategy	Act	Reconnaissance Create data	Analyse/ Reflect
PROBLEM SOLVING	Find/create solution Modify/Improve	Implement	Evaluate	Identify problem
CRITICAL ACTION INQUIRY	Create changes Tune/Improve	Implement changes	Observe Observe effects	Critique incident/s Explain effects
DIAGNOSTIC TEACHING	Design Continue/change intervention	Intervene	Assess Re-assess	Diagnose Check diagnosis
DIAGNOSTIC MEDICINE	Prescribe Continue/change treatment	Treat	Examine Re-examine	Diagnose Check progress/ diagnosis
CURRICULUM AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT	Design Modify/Improve	Produce/Trial	Monitor/Test	Evaluate

Figure 1 Thoughtful action and 7 kinds of action inquiry

The most important characteristic of all forms of action inquiry is that they follow a cycle of the same phases in the same order. But because the phases can be collapsed or expanded to suit the purpose of the inquiry, and the sequence can begin at any phase, the cycle comes in so many different guises that it is not always very obvious that it is the same cycle. For instance, some manufacturers describe their development work as *design, build, assess*; but the cycle they use has a prior cycle of developing the idea, an initiating phase of market research to establish its commercial viability and various design parameters, and the *assess* phase actually consists of producing and evaluating data on some trialing of the product, and that amounts to the *describe* and *review* phases of the action inquiry cycle. Similarly, Tyler's (1949) 'rationale' is a form of action inquiry; it's not usually seen as such because he omitted the implementation phase (that was deemed 'instruction' and dealt with separately from 'curriculum' then) and he wrote about *planning, producing*

and *evaluating* (with much emphasis on describable outcomes for review). Thus one can see that there are many kinds of action inquiry, of which action research is just one group.

Note that I've not specifically mentioned common features of action research such as participation and the improvement of practice. Action research may or may not be participatory or collaborative, and it seems to me that once one has learned something about practice through inquiry into action in the field of practice, it is highly likely that one will use that knowledge to improve future practice. The point is that I would not wish to exclude from action inquiry a process which was not participatory or in which improvement of practice were not main aims or outcomes. The purpose of this term is to include any form of deliberate inquiry in which action and inquiry proceed together with and through each other. By definition it involves the participants in taking action in their field of practice with a view to learning from it, and so one can include specific forms such as 'participatory action research' under the action inquiry umbrella.

Strategic action

On the other hand, strategic action is a crucial defining characteristic of all action inquiry. Strategic action is action which is based upon an understanding achieved through the rational analysis of deliberately sought information, in contrast to action which is a result of habit, instinct, opinion, or mere whim on the one hand, or irrelevant or partial knowledge on the other. The idea of deliberately seeking and analysing information is essential, though just how we do that varies in different forms of action inquiry. In reflective practice it may simply be ensuring that we are consciously looking for it (seeing how well students respond), and in action research it may be using a formal research method of data collection. In both cases, the planning of subsequent action based upon the information is deliberative: possibilities are created, analysed, discussed, and chosen.

I do not think, however, that strategic action is necessarily quite the same in all forms of action inquiry. In action research, for instance, my main criterion for strategic action is whether one has made an attempt at understanding the circumstances in which the action is to be taken. In all action inquiry one considers what is to be acted upon and how, but not necessarily the relationships that hold amongst circumstances, context, intent and action. Strategic action in socially critical action research, for instance, involves strategies aimed at increasing social justice. In short, strategic action is a form of deliberation which produces 'a kind of personal knowledge which manifests itself in wise judgement' (Grundy and Kemmis 1982).

DISTINGUISHING ACTION RESEARCH

Having suggested an overall category, it is not necessary but it may be helpful to arrange some of the subsumed terms within it so as to highlight their differences. So in the diagram below (*Figure 2*) I've laid out four common ways of relating thought and action which produce different practices. They are essentially different in terms of several continua. Thoughtful action is seen as the most continuous, private, natural, unarticulated and experiential practice; researched action as the most occasional, public, experimental discursive and technological.

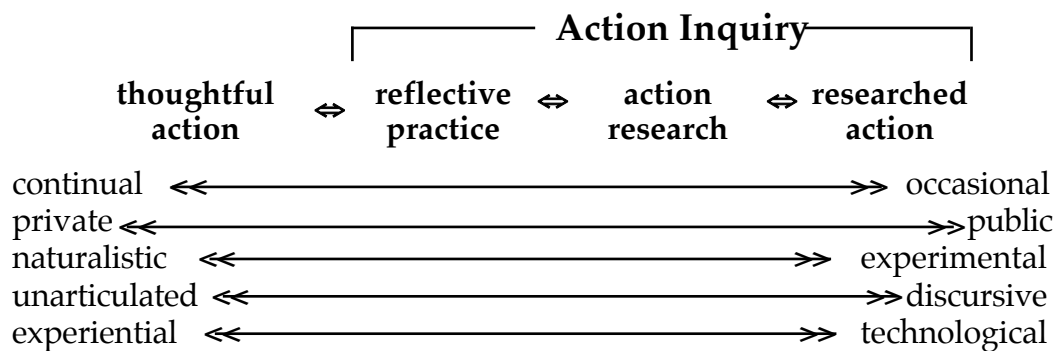


Figure 2

Four kinds of action inquiry

The five continua

I have used continua rather than discrete categories because the different kinds of action inquiry merge and overlap. For instance, in the example of action research I suggested that I might interview some students; were I engaging in reflective practice I might also do that, but I would not code their responses, try to explain them in theoretical terms and verify my explanation; rather I would simply listen carefully to their ideas and opinions and take them into account in deciding what to do next time. But it's seldom so clear: one of the differences between reflective practice and action research has to do with the nature of the description and analysis. Just thinking about what happened involves some kind of a description, even if it's simply a privately recalled memory, which renders it reflective practice rather than thoughtful action; but writing that recollection down moves the practice more towards research as it increases both the formality and the opportunity for public scrutiny of the recollection; and there comes a point at which the systematic recording of recollections in writing is recognised as a valid research procedure, which would clearly shift the practice from reflection to research.

1 continual – occasional

It should be clear that thoughtful action is continual in that it is the process of thought whenever we are not engaged in some 'mindless' routine; researched action, however, is something we'd only engage in when there's a major issue that is best dealt with in that way.

2 private — public

Thoughtful action is private in the sense that what goes on in our heads is private ... until we make it public, in which case we are describing it in some way, and that turns the practice into a kind of action inquiry. One of the purposes of research is to be meaningful to others, to provide more general understandings, and to contribute to public knowledge, and publication is a major reward for the amount of work necessary to action research an issue.

3 naturalistic — experimental

This continuum is not to be taken in the sense that to experiment is unnatural, but naturalistic as in naturalistic research, namely that which investigates things as they are with as little intervention as possible; in contrast, experimental research requires designed interventions that change some aspects of the situation being investigated.

Action research is experimental in the sense that the action is deliberately designed and has not been taken (in quite the same way) before. This is often a distinguishing difference between reflective practice and action research: we can reflect on any description of anything that has happened, whether or not it has been specifically planned for description, reflection and analysis. In fact, we usually only reflect on and analyse things when they've not gone according to plan. Reflective practice is thus more towards the naturalistic end of the continuum than is action research.

4 unarticulated — discursive

It's very difficult to articulate what we're doing when we're having to think about what we're doing, so thoughtful action tends to be unarticulated; but as soon as we begin to articulate what we are doing, we are engaged in some kind of a discursive practice about what it is we are doing. The more we shift from just doing something to working on a description of what we're doing, the more discursive the practice becomes. Of course, being social animals, our natural tendency is to communicate our ideas to others (and thus to engage others with our accounts of what we're doing); so, in contrast to thought, reflection and action research are not just discursive in the sense that to do they we must move from experiencing things to describing them, but also because they are often socially communicative and collaborative in some way or other.

5 experiential — technological

This continuum has to do with monitoring; it is partially explained by (and partially an explanation of) the previous two dimensions. When we are thinking about what we are doing we are not deliberately setting out to monitor it — we are simply taking note of what it is we are experiencing and feeding those impressions back into what we're doing. In reflective practice we are still working on our experiences, but we are doing so after the event, which means that we are working on some kind of a description of them, rather than on the experiences themselves as they happen. And as we move along this continuum into the other forms of action inquiry, we are adding less personal and private information to our descriptions (because we are using specifically chosen research techniques), and we are increasingly setting this information against our own personal experiences.

The meanings of these polarities will become clearer as I look at the three commonest action inquiry practices: thoughtful action, reflective practice, and action research.

Thoughtful Action

Thoughtful Action is any kind of action which is not automatic or reflex, and so requires thought.

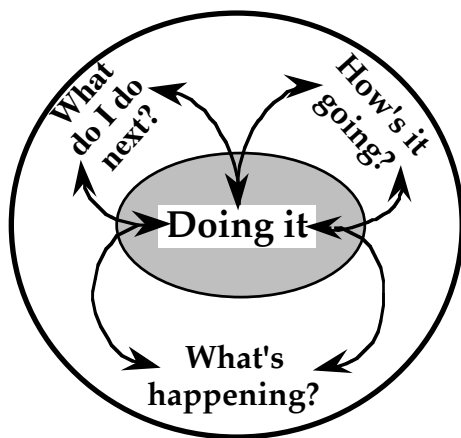


Figure 3: Thoughtful action

Example — John talking 1

I'll take the same example throughout this paper: the situation is a teacher overseeing a class of students engaged in individual, silent work.

Doing it	Watching students at their silent work	Observation
	<i>John talks to Susan.</i>	
What's happening?	John's talking to Susan.	Observation
How's it going?	That's not OK.	Evaluation
What'll I do?	If I say anything, it'll interrupt all the others.	Deliberation
What'll I do?	It may be about his work.	Deliberation
Doing it	Watching.	Continued action
What'll I do?	I've got to do something.	Deliberation
	<i>John looks up.</i>	
What's happening?	John's looked up.	Observation
Doing it	Meet eyes, stare hard and frown.	Unplanned Enactment
Doing it	Watching.	Continued action
	<i>John falls silent and resumes his work.</i>	
What's happening?	John's shut up and resumed his work.	Observation
How's it going?	That seems to have done the trick.	Evaluation

Thoughtful action is like action inquiry in that it has *plan*, *act*, and *review* moments, but it is not a form of action inquiry because it lacks the *describe* moment: description is unnecessary if one is acting immediately on one's perceptions. And although planning and evaluation are involved, they are only occasionally brought into play through conscious monitoring and immediate evaluation of one's instant (and therefore thoughtless) reactions to one's perceptions.

THREE DIFFERENT KINDS OF ACTION INQUIRY

1 Reflective Practice

Reflective Practice is any systematic and deliberate on-going use of a *plan, act, describe, reflect* sequence in which the reflection is a conscious attempt to evaluate the process and outcomes of the action as experienced by the actor. Reflective practice incorporates *Thoughtful Action*, but because reflection takes time and concentration *on reflection* (rather than on anything else such as continuing action, or instance), it tends to occur after action, some kind of description of the action is necessary, and it is principally that fourth moment that marks the difference between kinds of thoughtful action and reflective practice. However, in reflective practice the description is of the action inquirer's experience and it tends to be informal, usually just a recalling and perhaps a journaling of aspects of events, often whilst as they are being reflected on.

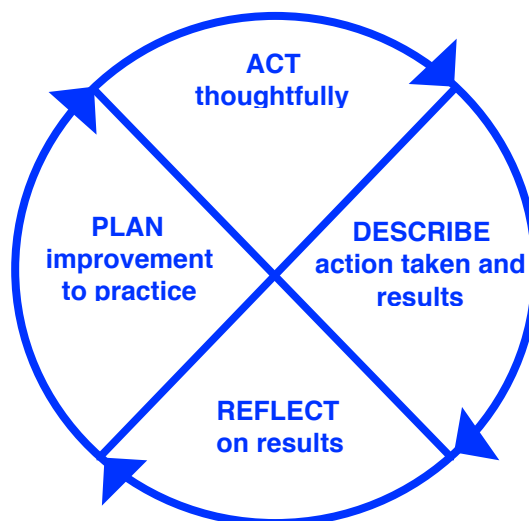


Figure 4

The reflective practice cycle

Example — John talking 2

Teacher has just frowned at John to stop him talking to Susan when he was supposed to be working silently on his own.

Description

John seems to find it hard to concentrate. He sits next to Susan, and he often distracts her. That's not OK. I've let it go a bit, hoping John will settle down, but I think I'll have to do something about it now.

Reflection

I wonder how I can find out what his problem really is. Does he have ADD? Is he too gregarious? Is he just disobedient?

I don't want to make him sit on his own at this stage, and I don't want to keep telling him off, but I should do something.

Plan

I think perhaps the best thing is to have a talk to him in recess to-day. I'll tell him why I find his behaviour a problem and ask him what he thinks about it. I won't tell him off, I'll give him some choices instead —

- he can decide to stay where he is but stop talking when he's meant to be working silently;
- he can decide to move himself out of temptation's way.

Action

Talk with John at recess.

Description

Well, that went well. John knew exactly what the problem was, and we talked about the difference between 'work talk' and 'chit chat'. He said I sometimes tell him off for work talk when it's not. I said I tend to go on how much he's been talking, and stop him when it's too much. He said he'd like to stay where he is, but he wants a warning if he's talking too much. I said that, for a warning, I'd ask him if it was work talk, but he's to be honest, and if it's chit chat he's to say so and be quiet. He agreed, so we'll just have to see how it goes.

Reflection

It was nice to talk to John in this way, and it all felt really positive — I seem only to talk to him to tell him off usually.

I've never really looked at this whole thing about talk properly before. I've always assumed that students can't work and chat, but I do it lots. I suppose it depends on what you're working on and how much chat. Perhaps this absolute 'no chat' rule stops them from learning to regulate their chatter. Maybe I need to relax it a bit to see what happens. I'll talk to them about it and see what they think. Perhaps if I discuss it with them they'll take a bit of responsibility for it themselves.

Comparison of thoughtful action and reflective practice

Looking at the thoughtful action example, one can see that it's not a clear cycle of separate moments. The reason for this is that it all takes place within the single moment of *action*; so any plan, act, describe, reflect sequence is disrupted. The teacher has to continue acting (ie watching the students, or intervening in what they are doing) whilst trying to produce data, reflect or plan, so these moments are continually disrupted by the requirement for on-going action. For the same reason there is no *describe* moment; one cannot take time out to describe what's happening when one is performing — the best one can do is to notice and remember as much as one can.

Another characteristic worth mentioning here is the kind of planning that could be done whilst acting. For me, a key characteristic of action research is the idea that what is planned is innovative in some respect; to plan to do what one usually does generally results in a very limited form of inquiry; so I think that some element of originality is essential in the plan, which is why *design* might be a better term for the planning moment. Terminology aside, the point is that it is simply not possible to engage in a design process whilst acting, so that is another major difference between thoughtful action and reflective practice.

On the other hand, I would not like to imply that it is not possible to engage in an action inquiry cycle within a moment of an action inquiry cycle; the point is only that it is not possible whilst acting (in contrast to within an action moment). For instance, if the implementation of planned action takes place intermittently over a period, there are breaks which can be used for a cycle (ie using the lunch break of a 1-day workshop to get feed-back on the morning, reflect on it, and replan the afternoon session). Similarly, on occasion it will be perfectly sensible and feasible to use the cycle in one of the moments other than action; for example, when training a group in reflective practice, we planned, acted, described and reflected on the reflection moment of their first cycle. I have also used the cycle in the planning and data production and analysis moments of action research projects, and I refer to these 'smaller' cycles within 'larger' cycles as *action inquiry epicycles*.

An important proviso about the kinds of distinctions I am making here is that I am not allocating a point on any one continuum to any one kind of action inquiry; they should not be seen as dichotomous, but rather as overlapping areas in a multi-dimensional space. In deciding what kind of action inquiry a particular instance is, I would 'characterise' it as 'more like this than that', recognising that it will have aspects of perhaps several kinds of action inquiry.

However, the aim is not inquiry, the cycle is not consciously employed, strategic action does not result, its different moments are merged because they are simultaneous rather than sequential, and there is no separate design phase. This last is very important because in action inquiry, action and inquiry are framed by design phases.

One can summarise some of the main differences as follows —

Thoughtful Action	Action Inquiry
is instantaneous — one decides what to do next, thinking about it only for a split second;	it requires one to take time out of practice , because
there is no cycle of clearly defined separate phases ; it's an unpredictable sequence because one's responding to events in the situation itself;	it is a clear cycle of separate moments in each of which one engages in completely different activities;
there's no <i>Describe</i> moment because one is engaged in acting;	In order for investigation into the effects of the action, one creates a formal record that describes the results of the action ;
one's not aiming at an improvement to practice — one's thinking about how best to do something one always does;	the major aim is to produce an improvement to what one always does ;
there's no element of inquiry and one is not deliberately setting out to learn something from the experience.	one designs and uses inquiry strategies to find out more about one's practice.

In short, whilst *Thoughtful Action* is not automatic, thinking about what one's doing doesn't change it into *Reflective Practice*.

Improving reflective practice

Before moving on to look at action research, perhaps it is important to note that every reflective practitioner needs to develop their process. One can develop reflective practice through being more deliberate and conscious in planning and monitoring action, of course, though this moves it towards action research. But reflective practice is itself a practice, and as one can improve any kind of practice through action inquiry, one can use reflective practice to improve reflective practice as such, without moving it towards action research.

I find that the easiest way to do this it through considering the quality of the action inquiry process during the "reflection on action" moment, adding *reflection on the action inquiry process* to the *reflection on the action taken*. In my work, I introduce a review of the reflective practice cycle right from the start, though initially only in terms of, "What have we learned about action inquiry from this experience?" and "What could we do to improve it next time?".

To distinguish between these two activities I use the terms *reflection* to refer to one's consideration and evaluation of the effects and effectiveness of the change in practice; and *review* to refer to one's consideration and evaluation of the effects and effectiveness of the action inquiry cycle. I would therefore represent a "self-improving" reflective practice cycle with two separate activities in both the action and reflection moments —

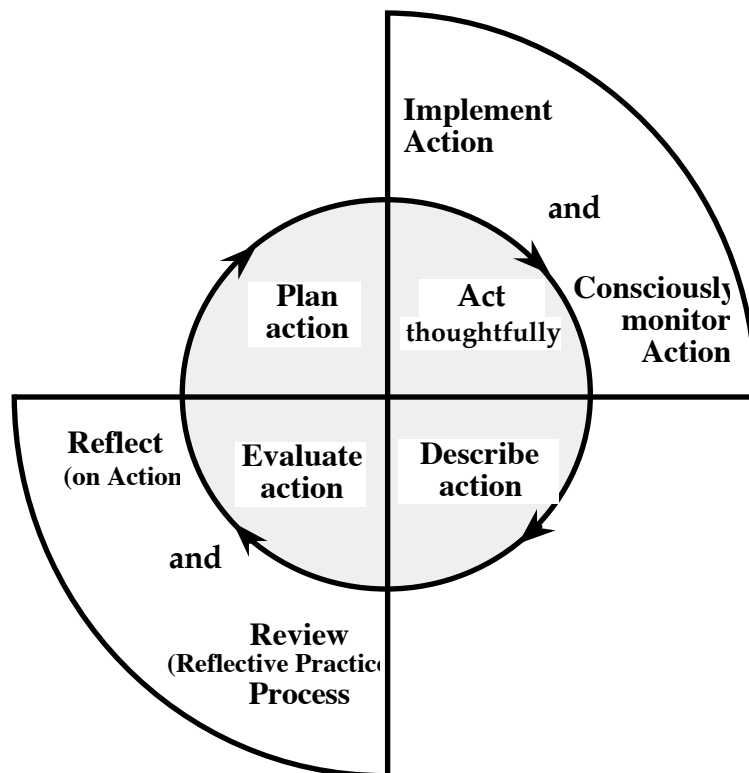


Figure 5

The Self-improving Reflective Practice cycle

2 Action Research

Action Research is an action inquiry sequence that tends towards more radically innovative action based on and monitored by recognised research procedures; action research usually begins with a formal reconnaissance, and there are specific data production and analysis phases, which produce a more general and less wholly actor-centred view of action in field of practice. The action research cycle can be represented as follows —

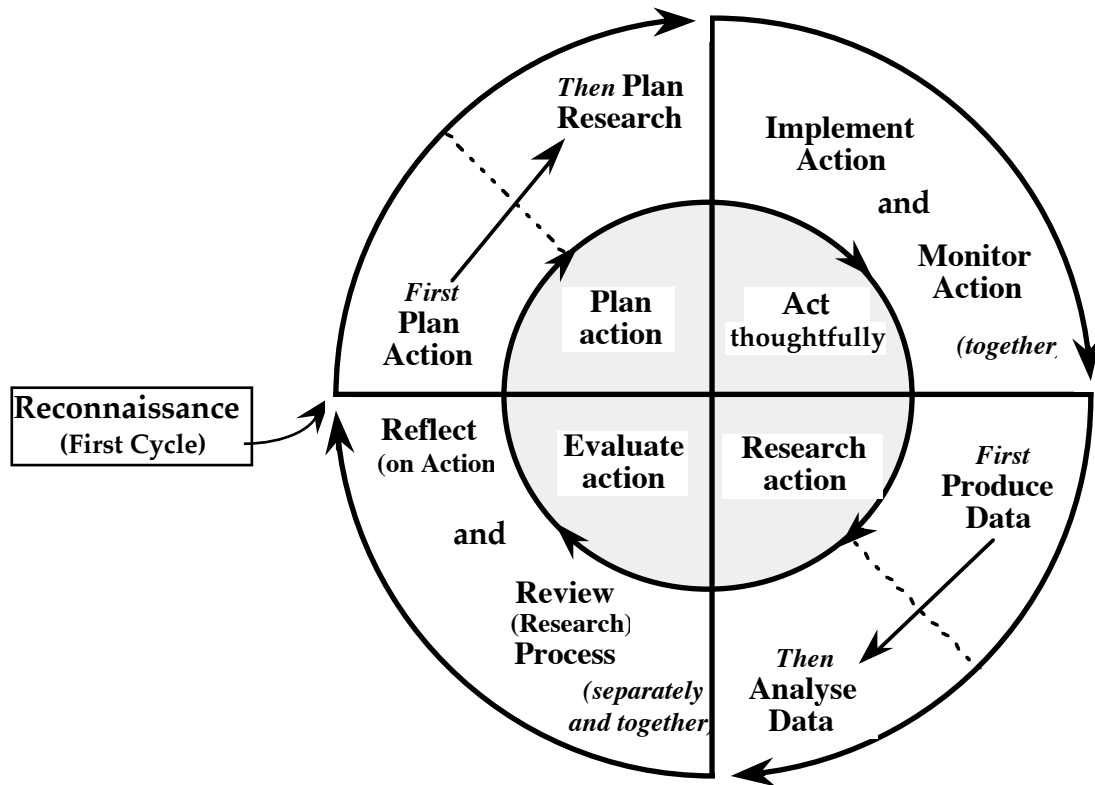


Figure 5

The full action research cycle

Because I think it important to emphasise the continuities between the various forms of action inquiry, I represent the action research cycle as a further development of reflective practice, basically merely changing the *describe* moment to *research* to emphasise the research element of the process.

Example — John talking 3

In reflecting on why she often has to stop John talking to other students when he is supposed to be working silently on his own, the teacher realises that she's never examined the role of student to student talk in her classes; she recognises the contradiction that whilst she's always assumed that students can't work and chat, she often does it herself. This is a new perspective which problematises her standard practice, and so offers a point of departure for an innovative change. She decides to find out what her students think about her absolute 'no talk' rule.

In wondering how best to see what they think, she considers various research techniques including more observation, interviews, a survey, or some focus groups; she chooses a focus group triangulation. She selects two groups of 6 students, one of comprised of those who tend to chat, one who seldom do; she

asks them to discuss the open question, "Would it be a good idea to allow people to talk to each other when you're working on your own?". She appoints a note-taker/reporter in each group, and also asks them to use de Bono's (1973) PMI process to find the *plus*, *minus* and *interesting* points about the idea before arriving at a recommendation. When they've done that, the note-takers report to the other group and she listens in, making her own notes as each group discusses the other group's points. She then reflects on and evaluates their ideas, reviews the validity and value of the investigation, and uses this information to design a new practice which she decides to monitor by asking all the students to complete an observation schedule which includes how often talking was a help or a hindrance to them in their work ...

Building to action research

Figure 6 (above) shows that, just as reflective practice incorporates thoughtful action, so action research incorporates reflective practice, and this is one reason why I suggest that an action inquiry project will usually incorporate more than one kind of action inquiry. This feature is also obvious in the way one builds towards action research: in reflective practice one is often just systematising and developing what began as thoughtful action, so action research is often simply a more formal and deliberate form of reflective practice in which one employs research methods to produce a more detailed and systematic description of the situation.

The SCOPE Program (Tripp, 1996) is structured on this movement from everyday practice to research. If one is to produce better information about the situation, then one has to plan to do it prior to action. One cannot produce many kinds of 'before' data after having implemented the changes to practice that one has designed. One cannot get a outside observer to monitor changes during the implementation phase after the implementation phase; and so on. So usually the move from reflective practice to action research begins with a two phase planning process: first to design the changes one is going to make, second to design how one is going to monitor the effect of the changes. This can constitute another intermediate stage, which I would call either *developed reflective practice* or *light action research*, and represent as follows

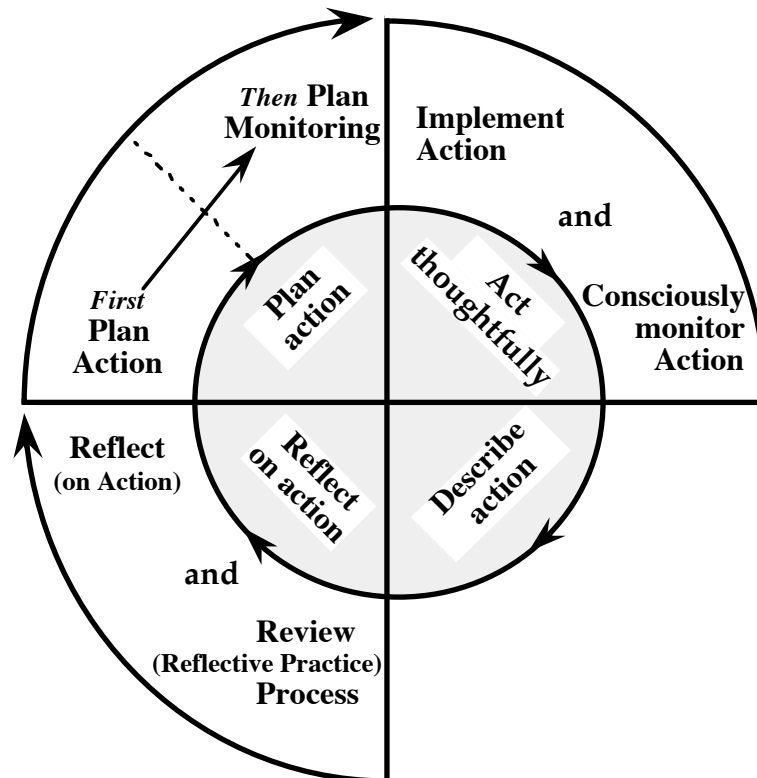


Figure 6: The developed reflective practice/light action research cycle

Planning in advance what information one will produce does not of itself transform reflective practice into action research, of course: it will only do that if one uses research procedures to monitor the results of the change, and there are many ways to improve monitoring of a situation other than through research procedures.

As with reflective practice, one can go into an *action research spiral*, a repetition of cycles each building on the last in terms of increased understanding and improved practice. Action research usually runs into a spiral because it is seldom used for single-cycle problem solving; it is such a demanding and powerful process that one tends to use it on larger, more intractable issues, and these one seldom gets sufficiently right at first attempt that no further improvement is obvious or possible. So people who use action research appropriately usually find themselves working on the same topic in a spiral of repeated cycles of improvement. That is why action research is generally done as a special project, whereas reflective practice is an everyday strategy for maintaining excellence.

Mixing the methods

The main reason that action research tends to be done as a project is that one has to take time out of work in one's field of practice to perform the necessary data production and analysis, report writing, and so on. This makes a well-designed and performed action research project something different to the on-going reflective practice spirals which underlie all excellent everyday professional practice, though the two will, of course, be fully integrated.

However, although action research tends to require a special project, one often finds it necessary to use some kind of a research technique to improve the information-base in reflective practice. One therefore finds people who are habitually engaged in reflective practice, occasionally using formal research techniques even though they

aren't engaged in a formal research project. This is another reason why I prefer the term action inquiry to action research for a project: it allows one to move between reflective practice and action research as appropriate.

Incorporating a reflective journal in action research

Most people keep a reflective journal when engaging in any kind of action inquiry; in reflective practice it is often the only kind of record kept; and in action research it is merely an adjunct to the research procedures. The critical incident file is one kind of journal that is particularly suited to being more formally incorporated into an action research project, however, as it is not so much a blow by blow account of the project, but a technique for problematising practice in a way that opens up the kind of radical innovations that characterise action research projects. I find the best way to represent this is in a matrix (overleaf).

Some people find this '3-moment/3-field' conceptualisation a more accurate representation of the action research cycle than the single field 4-moment circular process of Lewin's (popularised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1993) that I've been using hitherto. In particular, one can see that having action in the fields of practice and research avoids the problem the *action* and *description* moments are represented as being discrete and sequential in the single field 4-moment model, whereas they often overlap (as when, for instance, someone is using an observation schedule to monitor action). In fact, when one represents action inquiry as a single field 4-moment process, it is difficult to allocate monitoring and producing an observational record to any one moment, especially as aspects are also included in the planning and reflective moments.

3 Researched Action

Researched Action is an action inquiry sequence in which the main purpose is a contribution to public disciplinary knowledge (hence the order of the terms in its name). As in action research, the experimental action is based on and monitored by information produced through recognised research procedures, though these are likely to be performed in a more formal and rigorous fashion. It is also characterised by the simultaneous use of two different *plan, act, describe, review* cycles, one in the field of practice, the other in the field of research. Researched action is usually planned as research, i.e. to increase our knowledge about a problem or issue, and the action may be primarily an intervention designed to illuminate the research problem (Tripp, 1990b). There is also a reflective practice cycle within the research cycle.

3 OTHER KINDS OF ACTION INQUIRY

Researched action

Researched Action is an action inquiry sequence in which the main purpose is a contribution to public disciplinary knowledge (hence the order of the terms in its name). As in action research, the experimental action is based on and monitored by information produced through recognised research procedures, though these are likely to be performed in a more formal and rigorous fashion. Researched action is usually planned as research rather than as an improvement to practice; its aim is to increase our knowledge about a problem or issue, so the action may be primarily an intervention designed to illuminate a research question such as, *What makes people become more critically reflective of their practice* (Tripp, 1990b).

There are also, of course, a number of different kinds of action inquiry which don't sit so neatly on the above continua but are nevertheless clearly action inquiry rather than other kinds of research or practice. One of the most important of these in all the professions is diagnostic practice which can be defined as follows —

Diagnostic Practice

Diagnostic Practice employs the action inquiry cycle, but it begins with a description produced by a more deliberately technical approach, the purpose of which is the diagnosis of problems or clients' needs as the basis of planning. On the one hand, diagnostic practice differs from reflective practice in that the inquirer creates a description that is very different from their experience and bases their assessment of needs and outcomes on that. And on the other hand, diagnostic practice is much more narrowly focussed on needs and problem solving than is action research. In short, whereas in reflective practice we often (and quite properly) rely on whether 'it feels right' to us or not, in diagnostic practice (like action research) we use other, less personal ways of finding out what's happening prior to planning action. Diagnosis is more positivistic than reflective practice, aiming at a more 'objective' assessment, but unlike much research, it is concerned only with applying the information to a single local instance.

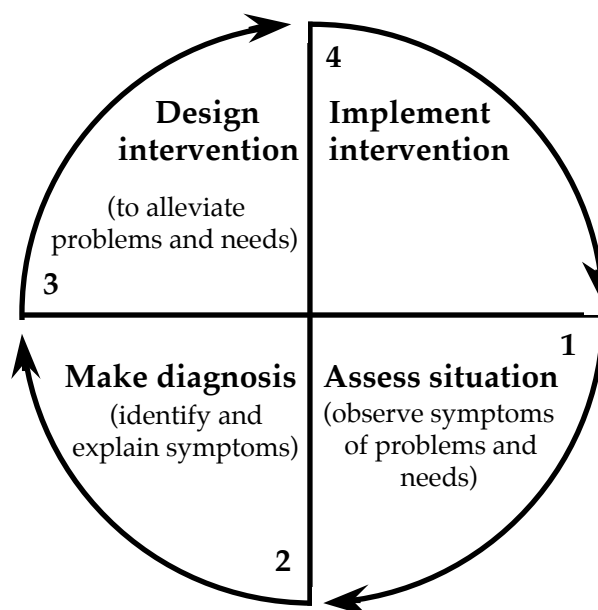


Figure 8

The diagnostic practice cycle

Diagnostic practice doesn't sit well on the continua because it can be done in a number of different ways, sometimes it is more formal than much action research (the administration of a diagnostic test, for instance), but in other ways it does not meet the criteria for research, its aim being solely appropriate action. One would therefore want to place it to both the left and right of action research in the continua.

Action learning

Another kind of action inquiry is action learning. Here again there is increasing confusion about the meaning of this term and how it relates to action research.

Many people in business are referring to any kind of action inquiry as action learning, which in the sense that one can learn from any inquiry, of course, it is. It is not surprising, therefore that Dick (1995) wonders whether the distinction between action research and action learning is worth preserving:

As they were previously practised, I think a useful distinction could be made. More recently, the advent of in-company action learning programs has begun to change this. The use of a team with a common project or problem leads to an action learning program which looks remarkably like action research.

In terms of current usage, he has a good point — action learning looks like action research because they share the same cycle, they both involve action, they both involve gaining an understanding of and from action, and they often share the same fields of action.

The distinction is important for me because in education action learning refers to a process of *doing something one wouldn't otherwise do in order to learn from doing it*, which is different from *learning from what one has to do in order to do it better*.

For example, an action learning process might involve making a map of an area in order to learn mapping skills and conventions. One might also go and make a map of an area in an action inquiry process, but it would be for a different purpose — it would be for a 'real' mapping purpose, in order to try out a new system of representation, for instance, in order to see if it helped the end-users.

Action learning is often a part of the action inquiry process, of course. Suppose one were engaged in a critical action inquiry process which involved helping a minority community group who were missing benefits because of some administrative systems. That inquiry might involve outsiders' experiencing the existing systems to answer the question, "How do the real users feel when trying to gain a benefit?" and that is a form of action learning.

Once produced, that knowledge could well be used to formulate some improvements and implement them in an action research program, which might be turned into a critical action inquiry process by setting out to change the human and other resources, structures and interests that created the problem in the first place.

Action research and action learning are also superficially similar in that one always wishes to learn something from an inquiry, even if it's only the time of day. But there are also many kinds of learning which do not involve any kind of inquiry (learning multiplication tables by rote, for instance, or learning a set syllabus by transmission from a book or teacher).

Furthermore, inquiry is always an active process on the part of the learner; inquiries may be collaborative, assisted by others, or made on behalf of others, but no one can make it a passive process — it can only be prevented or obviated.

For me, a defining characteristic of action learning is that it produces the kind of understanding that can only be gained from experience. That is not just intellectual knowing ("knowing that" and "knowing how" in the head), it's a combination of procedural knowing ("know-how", "skill"), tacit ("gut") knowing, and having feelings about the knowing. It is a whole experience of the thing known. Action

learning is about being there, in the sense of knowing how it feels as much as knowing what it is.

Many teachers think most research and academic learning are a waste of time in comparison with learning from experience; but when they set out deliberately to learn from experience they are using a form action inquiry which can incorporate both academic learning and research.

Learning from acting and acting on what's been learned is obviously how things should be, and it seems that in the real world of practice one will often involve the other at some stage. But I think this distinction is important because it allows us to clarify our purposes and to distinguish a special kind of learning.

To summarise, the difference is more in the purposes of the participants — one does action research primarily to change some aspect of how one practises in a field (teaching, learning, relating, healing, living, making money); one does action learning primarily to know about something (teaching, learning, relating, healing, living, making money).

But one approach is aimed at changing the way one performs an existing practice, the other is aimed at creating some kind of a practice in order to learn from it. They get confused because they both involve learning about a practice through practising it, and people do not always distinguish what they are doing it for.

CONCLUSION

Just a few points about the purpose of the continua by way of conclusion. First, it should be clear that as one moves from left to right along the continuum of action inquiry approaches, each method incorporates the methods to its left. It is important to remember that one will be acting thoughtfully as one implements the action or analyses the data in an action research cycle. This is important because I would not wish anyone to imagine that when they are action researching they cease to also reflect. It is also important because the reverse is not true — that because one is reflecting on one's practice, one is engaged in action research.

Second, it is important to remember that these different approaches are not seen as being fixed in the sense that the outcomes of reflective practice, for instance, are only and necessarily reflective practice. What the outcomes of one's reflection are depends upon what one does with the outcomes of one's reflection; it is not that one's reflections are simply 'not research', but that one has to treat (record and analyse) them in certain ways that are recognised as producing research in order to research them. Whether one does that or not is a matter of whether one believes it to be useful and appropriate to do so. Most projects therefore move between these different approaches according to the changing demands and constraints of the immediate situation.

Third, the way in which each approach incorporates those to its left means that the continuum could be seen as a hierarchy, and that I am trying to establish researched action as a form of action inquiry superior to any other. Read as intended, the continuum simply shows how various aspects of each process change in response to the outcomes sought. Again, it is a matter of what is appropriate at that point.

Fourth, these continua and the main continuum, then, are an indication of the way in which changes in some of the different characteristics produce recognisably different

kinds of practice which I think are worth fostering and selecting from. But at exactly what point reflective practice becomes action research is neither the point of, nor determinable from, this account: such things must always be a matter of judgement — are the accounts well written? reliable? comprehensive? properly coded? fully explained? ... and so on. The point of distinguishing a number of different approaches to action inquiry is to enable us to choose an appropriate and 'do-able' approach; and being clear about what we're doing should enable us to be more clear about how well we are doing it.

Finally, to return to the main point — the purpose of making these distinctions is not to prescribe in such a way as to prevent others from using action research, nor is it to do the opposite and to insist that they do action research rather than any other form of action inquiry. Nor am I attempting to establish and maintain hegemony over others through the imposition of unilateral and exclusive definitions — I am trying to facilitate a collaborative process for the production of some definitions essential to my work. The extent to which this paper meets the criteria of vision, expansion and inclusion must be for the reader to judge.

To summarise —

- 1 There are many kinds of action inquiry; but they all have the *plan, act, describe, review* cycle in common.
- 2 All kinds of action inquiry are equally important, useful and valuable; but sometimes one kind of action inquiry is more appropriate than another.
- 3 To warrant the designation 'action research' there should be a recognisable research component in the inquiry.
- 4 To action research something means shifting from our normal mode of being into a special mode of inquiry.

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the kind of problems that many people are experiencing in their encounter with action research, and to describe some of the differences between it and closely related methods in order to clarify them all. And the purpose of that clarification is to enable all kinds of action inquiry better to continue to be developed in ways that will increase their various strengths, enable us to choose the most appropriate from amongst an increasing range of possible approaches, and to open the fields of practice and learning to a variety of different approaches to action inquiry.

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Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the European Conference on Research on Education, University of Bath, UK, September, 1995. From 1995–2000 a copy was located in The Participatory Action Research Toolbox <http://munex.ame.cornell.edu/parnet/tools/>
It is now located on <ResearchGate.net>.