

UNIVERSITY *of York*

An Introduction to Action Research

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Sharing Practice and Developing
Language Teaching Projects

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Outline

- What is action research?
- Processes in action research
- Characteristics of action research
- Action research and 'real' research
- Two examples of action research
- Ten steps to a successful AR journey

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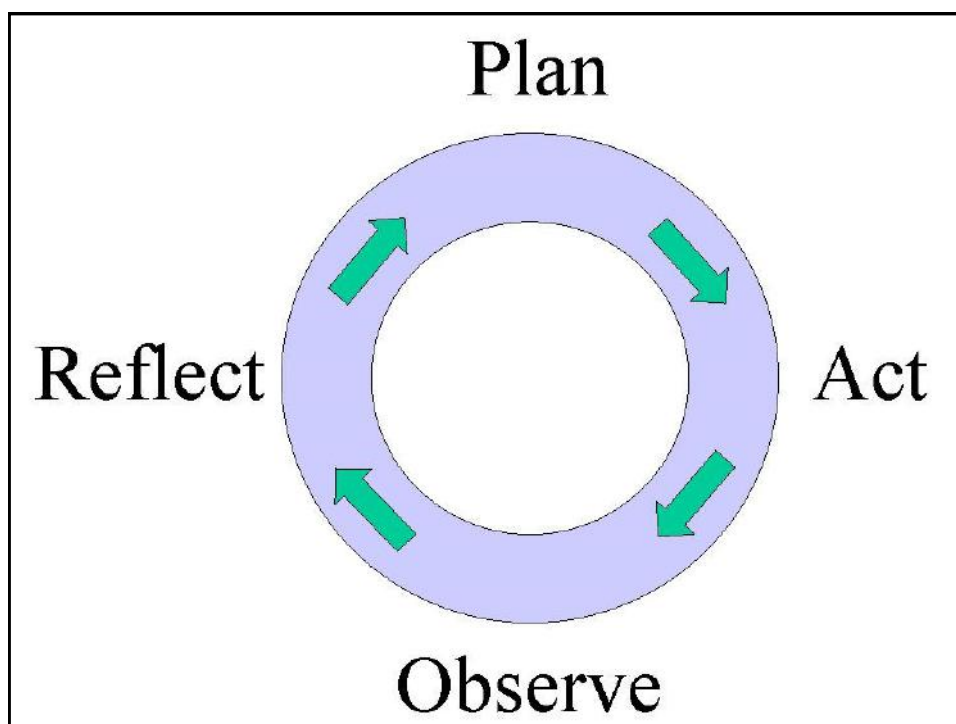
What is action research?

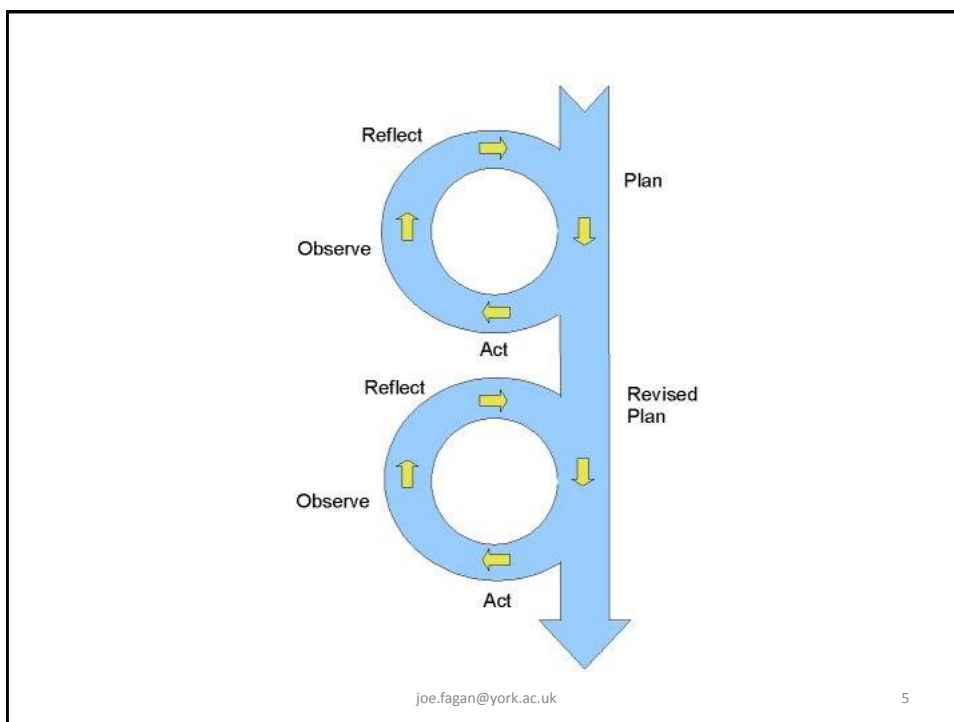
- AR involves a self reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community.
- The aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice.
- Action research is underpinned by democratic principles in that the ownership of change is invested in those who conduct the research.

(Burns, 2010, p.2)

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Processes in action research

- **Develop a plan** of critically informed action to improve what is already happening
- **Act** to implement the plan
- **Observe** the effects of the critically informed action in the context in which it occurs
- **Reflect** on these effects as the basis for further planning, subsequent critically informed action and so on, through a succession of stages.

(Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p.10)

Characteristics of action research

- Focus on a particular social situation
- Collaborative/dialogue with others to identify the issues and to collect and analyse data
- Deliberate intervention into the operation of the status quo
- Processes of research lead to the construction of knowledge and theory (and political action)

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Characteristics of action research

- Testing of knowledge and theory by feeding back into changes in practice
- Evaluation of changes through further cycles of action and reflection
- Opening of theories and knowledge to wider scrutiny through publication, information dissemination, and application by others in their own situations

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Action research and critical theory

Central concepts are:

- The empowerment of participants in the social situation
- Confrontation of inequalities/in the system
- Transformation of the social situation
- Movement towards “a better world”
- Self-conscious criticism through awareness of ideological and epistemological assumptions that shape the social situation
- Enhanced awareness of participants own subjective, intersubjective and normative frames of reference

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Action research and ‘real’ research

What is the difference between AR and other kinds of research?

- The answer has to be a characteristic that is not the case for applied research.
- The characteristic can’t be that it is teachers who carry out the research - applied research is also done by teachers.

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ACTION RESEARCH	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention.	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment.			

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APPLIED	Societal phenomena can be scientifically studied and understood.	To generate understanding of human behaviour and problems for the purpose of intervention.	Qualitative and quantitative approaches, data collection directed towards ensuring reliability and validity		
ACTION RESEARCH	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention.	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment.	Mainly qualitative, interpretive, cases studied reflectively through cyclical observational and non-observational means.		

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ACTION RESEARCH	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention.	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment.	Mainly qualitative, interpretive, cases studied reflectively through cyclical observational and non-observational means.	Development of action to effect change and improvement, and deeper understanding in one's own social situation.	

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APPLIED	Societal phenomena can be scientifically studied and understood.	To generate understanding of human behaviour and problems for the purpose of intervention.	Qualitative and quantitative approaches, data collection directed towards ensuring reliability and validity	Development of generalizable theoretical knowledge that can be applied to the social situation.	Objectivity, rigour and scientific insights for application to social situations, published through specialised, refereed, applied journals.
ACTION RESEARCH	People within social situations can solve problems through self-study and intervention.	To develop solutions to problems identified within one's own social environment.	Mainly qualitative, interpretive, cases studied reflectively through cyclical observational and non-observational means.	Development of action to effect change and improvement, and deeper understanding in one's own social situation.	Subjectivity, feasibility, trustworthiness, and resonance of research outcomes with those in the same or similar social situation.

Action research and 'real' research

Questions for establishing the reliability and validity of a study

TYPE	KEY QUESTION
INTERNAL RELIABILITY	Would an independent researcher, on reanalysing the data, come to the same conclusion?
EXTERNAL RELIABILITY	Would an independent researcher, on replicating the study, come to the same conclusion?
INTERNAL VALIDITY	Is the research design such that we can confidently claim that the outcomes are a result of the experimental treatment?
EXTERNAL VALIDITY	Is the research design such that we can generalise beyond the subjects under investigation to a wider population?

Nunan (1992, p.13)

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Action research and 'real' research

- Classrooms are too complex for us to control all the variables in the manner prescribed by experimental research.
- AR proposes an alternative purpose for research – to try and understand and deal with immediate practical problems facing teachers and learners (Allwright and Bailey, 1991).

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Examples of action research: English language teaching

British Council, Spain

- Plan
 - Problem: Limited variety in techniques for oral corrective feedback
 - Preliminary investigation: video record classes + peer observation
 - Hypothesise and identify issues for target (+ questionnaire)
 - Plan intervention: vary error correction techniques (avoid problem techniques)
- Act
 - Carry out intervention over an agreed period of time (2 weeks)
 - Intervention is critically informed
- Observe
 - Video record classes + peer observation: was intervention successful?
 - Document context, actions and options, note change and impact (+ questionnaire)
- Reflect
 - Report: Write assignment on experience for MSc in TESOL
 - Report: Give a session at INSETT day

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Examples of action research: @York

Peer Support for Teaching

- Plan
 - Problem: difficult to get students engaged and give personal opinions in large lecture group scenarios
 - Preliminary investigation: Noting down observations in class/lecture capture
 - Hypothesis: lecture hall physical layout not conducive to group work or discussion scenarios, student type more reticent to giving personal opinions
 - Plan intervention: join university pilot study for Responseware classroom polling software, and set up PST group with 2 colleagues to test out different ways of using software in different contexts and student groups
- Act
 - Carry out intervention: Over Terms 1 & 2
- Observe
 - Noting observations (pros and cons, dos and donts)
 - Peer observation
- Reflect
 - Report: PST group meets up twice a term to compare experiences and reflect
 - Report: Preparation for Dept Teaching and Learning Workshop in June 2016
 - Report: York Professional and Academic Development (YAPD) Scheme

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Ten Steps for a successful AR journey

1. Find colleagues interested in AR to work with.
2. Maintain a reflective and enquiring attitude to your teaching.
3. See classroom challenges and 'problems' as positive opportunities for change for you and your students.
4. Be confident in your ability to find good outcomes for classroom challenges.
5. Look for opportunities and take risks to change your teaching strategies.
6. Follow your interests and passions about teaching.
7. Keep reviewing and refining your personal practical knowledge.
8. Be a strong voice for teacher inquiry and professional development in your organisation.
9. Share your thoughts with others.
10. Don't be discouraged – keep going!

Burns (2010, p. 167)

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References & Further Reading

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