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The Open
University



Action Research A Guide for Associate Lecturers

April 2005



Practical pedagogy from COBE

This booklet is part of the Practical Pedagogy series from the Centre for Outcomes-Based Education. The series aims to promote good practice and offer practical advice in learning, teaching and curriculum development.

COBE works with course teams, faculties and regions to support innovative curriculum design, assessment and academic staff development.

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Preface

The availability of HEFCE/ HR strategy funding for action research activities across the Open University in relation to the Learning Outcomes and Their Assessment (LOTA) project, involved Associate Lecturers (ALs) in all regions of the OU and led to considerable interest in action research as part of professional development. The Guide was originally produced to encourage and support those who had expressed an interest in undertaking action research. Since then, many ALs have completed their action research enquiries and provided us with feedback. We have updated the Guide in response to this feedback and have included some examples of ALs' projects and quotes from their reports.

We realise that although all ALs are the potential audience for this text, if you are new to 'action research' you may not be aware of what it involves and will have no experience of its use. On the other hand, you may be familiar with the process and perhaps are teaching OU courses in which your students are involved in some form of action research as part of their work on the course. For this reason we have structured the guide in four sections; the flow chart on the following page should help you to select a route through the material that best suits your needs.

Acknowledgements

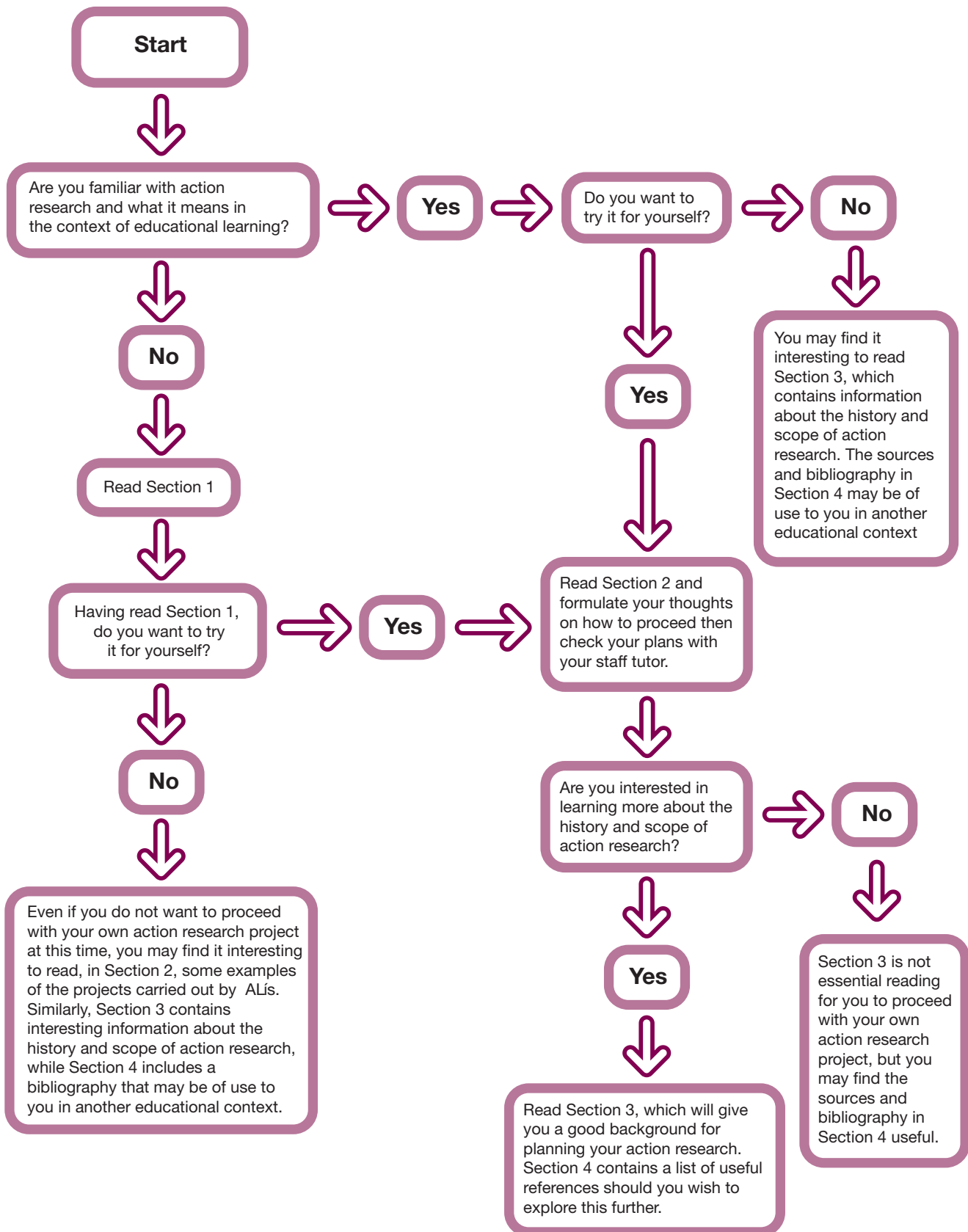
I would like to thank Richenda Power and John Naysmith, who were the authors of the first version of the Guide, and all those who gave feedback and produced material for subsequent versions. In particular I want to acknowledge the contributions from the 70 ALs who subsequently carried out action research enquiries and were involved in various dissemination activities. Their reports are available, with other useful information, on the OU Action Research website. <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/cobe/action-research/>

Maggie Coats

COBE

March 2005

How to use this Guide



Section 1

An introduction to action research for Associate Lecturers within the OU context

1.1 Three initial questions

What is action research?

Action research can be described as: any research into practice undertaken by those involved in that practice, with an aim to change and improve it. It is therefore, a process of enquiry by you as a practitioner (an OU tutor in this case) into the effectiveness of your own teaching and your students' learning.

Action research is about both 'action' and 'research' and the links between the two. It is quite possible to take action without research or to do research without taking action, but the unique combination of the two is what distinguishes action research from other forms of enquiry. It is, of course, not restricted to an educational context, though that is the focus of this Guide.

What is in the Guide?

This Guide has four sections:

- Section 1 is a brief introduction to action research and a series of questions to help you decide if you want to proceed further
- Section 2 is for those who want to know more or have decided they want to engage in an action research enquiry, either individually or with AL colleagues
- Section 3 is for those who want to know more about the history, background, methodology and potential controversy surrounding action research, either before becoming engaged in an activity or having completed one
- Section 4 contains information on resources

If you are studying for a qualification that includes discussions on research methods or if you are compiling a portfolio of evidence and want to contextualise the research you have completed, then Sections 3 and 4 provide more detailed text and background reading.

Why have we produced the Guide?

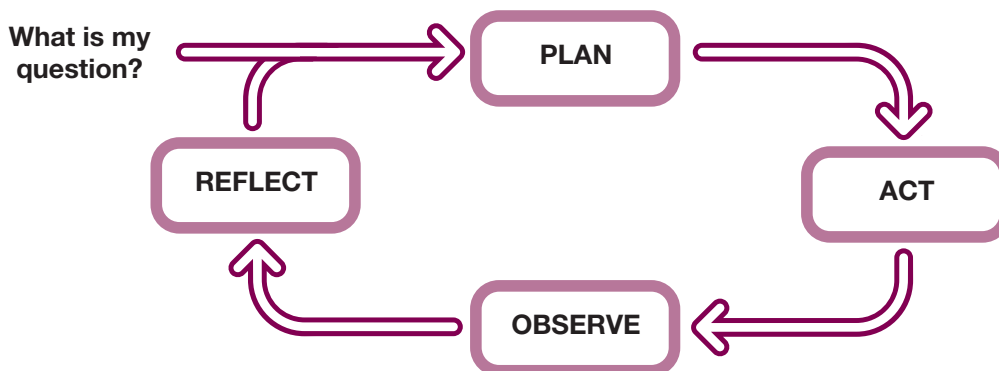
- Within education, there is a renewed interest in action research as a process that can contribute to professional development
- Many ALs have expressed an interest in participating in action research activities but are unsure how to proceed
- Within the OU there are ongoing discussions about ALs' educational professional development (EPD) and we need to know if this approach works within an OU context and how best to support ALs who want to try it
- Evidence and reports generated through your action research may be used to support accreditation or membership of professional bodies

1.2 What is the action research process and how do I start?

The action research process is often described as:

- Cyclical with four inter-related stages: plan, act, observe, reflect (see Figure 1 below)
- Collaborative in two senses:
 - that many action research activities are best carried out with colleagues
 - that action research always involves the participants, at least in knowing what is being explored and why
- Qualitative rather than quantitative with the emphasis on language rather than numbers
- Reflective, involving critical reflection on both the process and the outcomes

Figure 1: The action research process



(This process is amplified in Figure 3, Section 2.2)

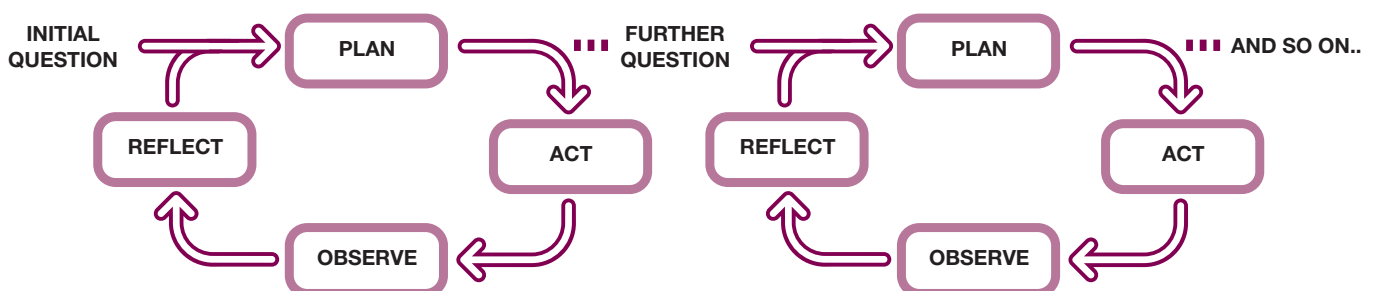
The action research process usually starts with a question or an observation raised either by you or by your students, about an issue, problem or difficulty experienced by some or all of them in their learning. Alternatively, a more 'affirmative' approach might encourage you to look at actions that are successful with some of your students so that you can extend this 'good practice' to all your students.

The cycle continues as you decide on some action to investigate the question, perhaps by exploring how your students perceive the issue or how you might adapt a different approach in your teaching.

This will involve you in collecting some evidence, either in the form of feedback from your students or by observation of their work.

The process is rarely a simple cycle but more a spiral: reflection on your action and your findings may lead to another question and further action, usually a change in your practice, which in turn loops forward to further exploration and greater understanding of how you teach and how your students learn, as represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Action research moving forward



Action research outcomes remain the 'property' of the practitioner and the participants. While dissemination may be appropriate and of interest to others the main benefit should be to you and your current students, or future cohorts of your students who will benefit from your developing professional expertise.

If you have now decided that you might want to plan and implement an action research activity, Section 2 of this Guide gives you practical help and some examples.

If you are undecided or would like to know more about the wider context, the next sub-section outlines some points to consider.

1.3 The current context: action research as professional development for Associate Lecturers

(i) Current changes in Higher Education and in the Open University

Since the Dearing Report (1997) we have seen considerable changes in HE and in the OU:

- There has been greater emphasis on learning and teaching both generically and within a subject, through initiatives such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Learning and Teaching Subject Networks (LTSNs) and the Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs)
- The emphasis in the curriculum has shifted from a description of the content to an explicit focus on developing learning skills (the Quality Assurance Agency and, within the OU, the LOTA project, are examples)
- An increase in the awareness of learning outcomes means that there has to be an explicit emphasis on their assessment and on learning through assessment
- In future, the OU will have to place greater emphasis on - and allocate resources for - the presentation as well as the production of courses; in this the role of the tutor is critically important
- The role of the tutor in the process of assessment must have a higher profile
- There is greater recognition of the importance of you, the tutor, both in the knowledge you have of your students and in providing feedback to your course team (for example, as questioned in QAA audits).

All this leads to renewed focus on the importance of the AL role as a teacher, especially through assessment.

(ii) A need to revisit staff development within the OU especially that of ALs

Centrally produced materials, such as the SOL series and Open Teaching Toolkits, remain an important resource for all ALs, as do regional events, which provide an essential opportunity to meet with colleagues. As important as they are, however, these resources do not always recognise the diversity of ALs in terms of their own preferred approaches to learning, their educational professional development or personal circumstances. Action research encourages you to take responsibility for the direction of your own development.

(iii) Staff development and autonomy

Practitioner enquiry or action research enables you to select the focus of your own development by encouraging you to ask questions:

- What is not working for you and your students?
- What is working reasonably well but could be improved?
- What is working very well and why?

The AL role and contract makes reference to the professionalism of ALs; provision of educational professional development and research opportunities need to recognise this.

(iv) Collaboration between ALs

This has always been an important component of staff development and action research activities recognise and draw on this potential. Although some ALs choose to work alone, the most effective action research is usually done collaboratively. This is because working with another AL or in a small group

encourages you to reflect on your practice at all stages of your project from planning through to completion. Such shared reflection is likely to include some change in your practice and may well raise further questions. Being able to discuss these with a colleague who is involved in the same process is valuable. Whether or not you choose to work in collaboration, the important thing is that your enquiry should lead to critical reflection and to the development of your practice. (Collaborative action research is discussed further in Section Three.)

(v) Recording what you do as you do it and summarising it in a 'report' at the end

There are several reasons why this is important:

- Dissemination of your findings as well as your methodology can be shared more widely
- It forms part of the collection of 'findings' generated by all ALs taking part in this kind of activity
- It contributes to ongoing discussions in the OU about AL staff development provision
- It provides you with some 'evidence' of what you have done, which you may choose to use in your own professional development, such as a portfolio compiled for accreditation
- The HEA may require evidence that members have engaged in continuing EPD and action research is one way of doing this.

The dissemination of your findings could take a variety of forms: an item in a regional newsletter or a presentation to colleagues at a regional event; a report circulated to colleagues or submitted to the Knowledge Network of the OU – <http://kn.open.ac.uk/>.

(vi) Action research and educational professional development (EPD)

To emphasise the value of action research for ALs here are some quotes from the first cohort who engaged in enquiries into their own practice.

This project had a positive impact on my correspondence tuition in a number of important ways. For a start, it made me focus more directly on the nature of the advice I was giving to students and to think about how this tied in with the specific learning outcomes of that particular assignment. (Level 2 Sociology tutor)

This project has made us aware that reflection doesn't 'just happen'. It involves some effort and we need to create occasions and mechanisms to gather and reflect on feedback if we are to maximise its effectiveness. It was important to hear students talk about how they use feedback in correspondence tuition. Maybe we could make more use of opportunities in tutorials and on the phone to do this. (Level 1 Social Science tutors)

I feel that my professional development was enhanced through the opportunity to interview students directly, something that I did for the first time. The experience has, hopefully, made me less anxious about seeking out and acting upon comments of whatever nature. (Level 2 Languages tutor)

One of the most positive outcomes this year, I felt, was that of involving students. Making them aware of the issues I was interested in researching and why I thought they were important had the effect of making my students more aware of, and interested in, these aspects for themselves. This led, in many cases, to an impression that the students were 'taking charge' more positively in this area of competence and felt able to reflect on it thoughtfully at defined points in the year. (Levels 2 and 3 Arts tutor)

Perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to reflect on my teaching has allowed me to think about and develop more effective ways of teaching critical evaluation skills, from which, I hope, future groups of students will also benefit. (Level 3 Psychology tutor)

It may sound obvious but I think taking part in the project made me realise that professional development is not just about courses led by others with a more academic knowledge of teaching. It can be more personal than this, relating directly to aspects of my tutoring that I wish to explore or improve. This makes the whole issue of development more approachable. (Level 2 Maths tutor)

If you now think that you may be interested in engaging in action research with colleagues and/or your students, continue with Section 2.

If you would like to know more about the history of action research and how it has been used in various contexts, go to Section 3.

Section 1

More detailed information for those who are interested in trying action research

2.1. Defining action research

As with other approaches to research, you will not be surprised that there are various different schools of action research. (We will return to this briefly in Section 3, but see Kemmis, 1997, for more detail.) The term 'action research' has often been used in a similar way to other terms used to describe research undertaken by educational practitioners, such as: 'classroom research' (Hopkins, 1985); 'self-reflective enquiry' (Kemmis, 1982); 'educational action research' (Carr and Kemmis, 1986); and, 'exploratory teaching and learning' (Allwright and Bailey, 1991). You may also find it referred to as 'practitioner enquiry', 'reflective analysis' or 'evidence-based practice'. The most important component of action research is that it does include both action and reflection that lead to enhance practice.

Kemmis and McTaggart distinguish it from the normal practice of teaching in the following way:

- 'It is not the usual thinking teachers do when they think about their teaching. Action research is more systematic and collaborative in collecting evidence on which to base their group reflection.
- It is not simply problem solving. Action research involves problem-posing, not just problem-solving. It does not start from a view of 'problems' as pathologies. It is motivated by a quest to improve and understand the world by changing it and learning how to improve it from the effects of the changes made.
- It is not research done on other people. Action research is research by particular people on their own work, to help them improve what they do, including how they work with and for others.
- Action research is not "the scientific method" applied to teaching. There is not just one view of "the scientific method"; there are many.'

(Kemmis and McTaggart, 1992, pp.21-22)

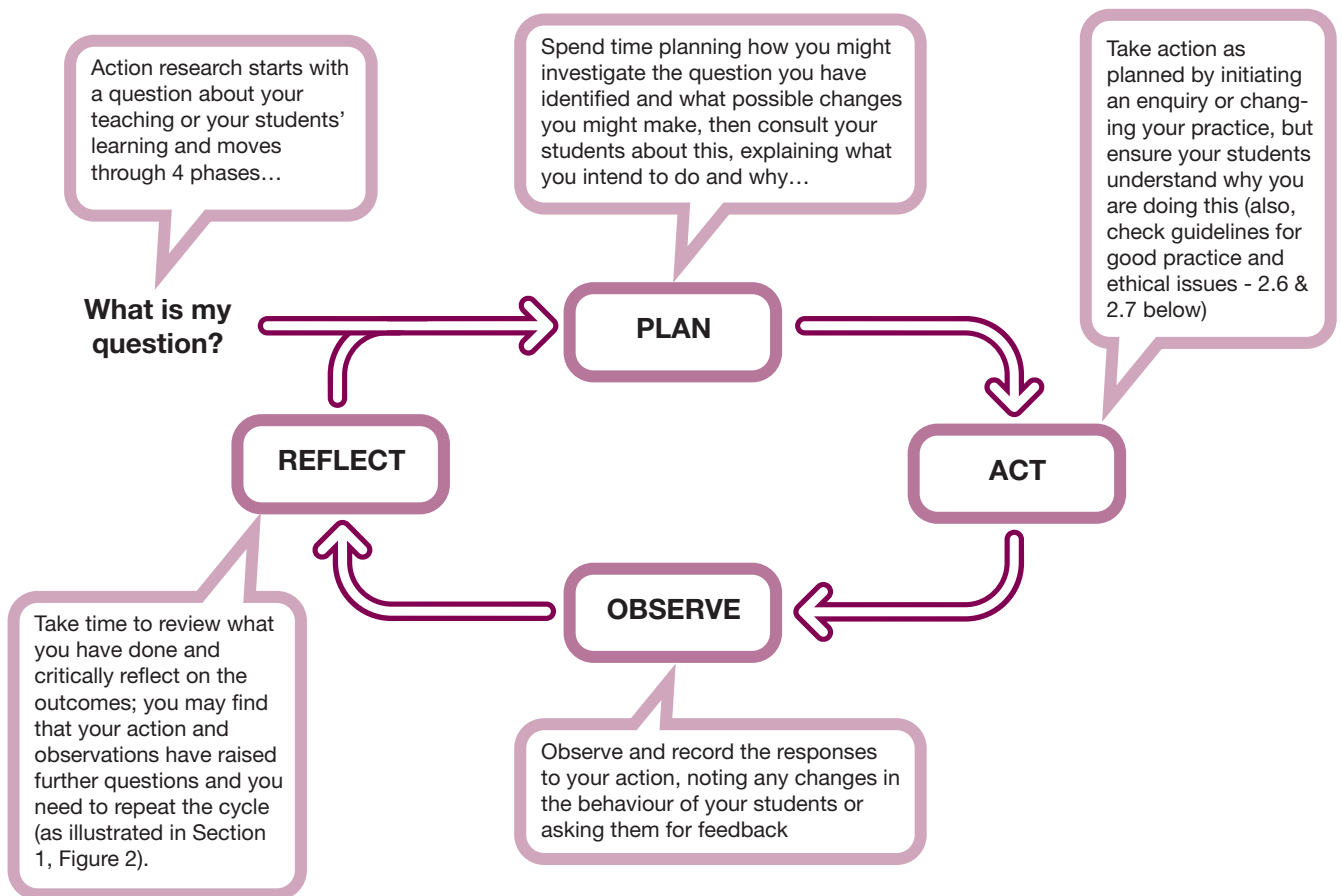
However, if action research is different to the normal practice of teaching, to what extent is it 'research'? Notwithstanding Kemmis and McTaggart's differentiation between action research and teaching, there is obviously a close connection between the two and it is this close connection that makes the approach a particularly attractive one for practitioners. The self-initiated approach to research and to an improvement in practice is another strong attraction of the action research approach. Indeed, some have argued that it is a legitimate part of good teaching.

Action research involves practitioners in studying their own professional practice and framing their own questions. Their research has the immediate goal to assess, develop or improve their practice. Such research activities belong in the daily process of good teaching, to what has been called the 'zone of accepted practice' (Zeni, 1998, p.13).

2.2 Action research in the OU

In this Guide we will be using the simple four-phase cycle introduced in Figure 1 and amplified here.

Figure 3: The four-phase cycle



So what are the opportunities for using action research in your own teaching situation? These were some of the questions explored by the 70 ALs who took part in an OU action research initiative:

What do students make of my TMA feedback?

How can I get my students to engage with the feedback I provide on their scripts?

Does the information about tutorials sent to students by tutors encourage or discourage them to attend?

Can tutorial activities improve the way students tackle TMA questions?

How can I support third level students' understanding of critical evaluation?

How do I enhance my students' learning on a course with implicit learning outcomes?

How best can I communicate with my students and meet their individual needs?

2.3 Planning your own enquiry

We hope that by now you will have a notion of what Action Research is and are beginning to think how you might put it into practice as an Associate Lecturer. You now need to identify an area of your practice that you would like to change or improve. Having done so, you may find the following series of questions useful in helping you to plan an action research project focused upon a particular area of your practice. Note that 'data' refers not only to statistical data but also to any 'information' you collect. Given that you will be working with your own tutor group, it is unlikely that the numbers involved will make statistical analysis helpful or reliable.

What is the evidence of - or your intuition about - the difficulty, problem or desirable improvement to be made?

What are your 'hunches' - if any - about the likely causes and outcomes?

Would it be useful to explore aspects of your successful practice, trying to find out why things went well for some students?

What exactly will you need to investigate? Can you formulate the nature of the investigation in two or three key questions?

What will you need to know in order to explore your key questions? What data will need to be collected in order to acquire such knowledge?

Who might you want to work with? Will you work alone or collaboratively? If working directly with students, how will you get their agreement to participate?

What are the likely sources of data? Where, when and how can data be collected?

Have you checked issues of confidentiality? Have you considered the ethical issues involved in your enquiry, as discussed in 2.7 below?

How will observations for each activity or stage be recorded? What will be the likely scale, timing and location of each exercise?

How will data from each exercise be analysed? Will they be quantifiable? Will you have to make qualitative judgements? If so, how?

Who will need to know the results of your enquiry and how will you inform them?

How might your practice be affected by the results of this exercise and how will you set time aside for reflection?

When you have answered these questions you will have enough information to start your project:

- You have defined the 'problem' or question. You have an idea about its possible cause
- You now need to collect some evidence to explore your idea
- You can then take action aimed at improving the situation in some way and observe the effects
- Finally, you need to reflect on whether the action has made a difference – and perhaps, as a result of what you have found, you may decide to start the whole cycle again.

2.4 Examples of action research enquiries

One group of ALs who completed action research enquiries were asked to summarise their findings by answering three questions:

- What did you do?
- What did you discover?
- What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

Here are some of the summaries they provided.

1. Learning how to learn action research project

(MU120, T191, T209, T397, E839)

What did you do?

- o I explored students' views about Learning How to Learn (LHTL) and what it actually is
- o I wanted to see whether students had changed their views of LHTL over time and, for those students who had changed their views, to try to get an idea of why, when and how that happened
- o I hoped to identify ideas that might help future students in their understanding of LHTL

What did you discover?

- o Students can and do change their views about LHTL and this often seems to be linked to providing a context so that they can see why it is useful
- o The course materials for the courses that I tutor did not always explain fully why LHTL is important
- o Some students would find this useful

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o In terms of changes to my practice, I piloted a new handout exercise in tutorials that will build on the ideas suggested by the students. Using the Kolb cycle (which was mentioned positively by several of the students), I put together a handout that shows students the 'why' of this process as soon as possible, giving case studies of students who have found LHTL helpful and why. I used this in a mid-point tutorial for T209, and used an exercise that is course related to use alongside. I am still trying to work out how I can use this for other courses

Karen Rex, R02

2. The Long Term Effectiveness of Initial Contact Practices

(S103)

What did you do?

- o Studied initial contact material used previously
- o Initiated some changes in this material
- o Evaluated outcomes in the short and long term

What did you discover?

- o Response to revised initial response was significantly higher than previously
- o Those who failed to respond were predictably those who very quickly showed signs of lack of progress
- o For those who responded positively the impetus and rapport continued up to and including the ECA

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o Change the 'chaser' letter for TMA01 from that provided through regional office to a more positive and personal one
- o Immediately after the cut-off date for TMA01 make telephone/email/letter contact rather than waiting for a week or so
- o Within two weeks of TMA01 cut-off date, refer those 'at risk' to regional office by email

Carole Arnold and Norma Rothwell, R08

3. Is correspondence tuition effective for all our students?

(DD100)

What did you do?

We gathered feedback from students on how they learned from correspondence tuition:

- o By sending out questionnaires with assignments
- o By talking to students in a group at tutorials
- o Through telephone interviews

What did you discover?

- o Students emphasized feedback on essay writing skills was of more value than feedback on content
- o The importance to students of positive feedback especially when pointing out weaknesses
- o The time and effort students say they put into analysing and applying feedback

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o Take more time to investigate how students are using or trying to apply feedback e.g. in tutorials and phone calls
- o Be careful to be constructive, encouraging and positive in feedback and provide feedback that students can apply
- o Give examples to support advice on structure, essay skills, how to use materials
- o Use research to help focus feedback on monitoring other tutors' work

Rosie Collins, Pauline Harris, Rosemary Lux, Janet Parr, R05

4. Mid-Course Review of Students' Progress

(SK220)

What did you do?

- o Invited students in both groups to take part in a review of progress after TMA02 (early June)
- o Interviewed each other's students on the phone using a list of questions from the Learning How to Learn Toolkit
- o Followed up requests for further help

What did you discover?

13/35 students replied that through their reflections:

- o they have identified learning skills needs which we have been able to address
- o they have expressed concern about course overload and assessment strategies
- o we have been reassured about our professional performance

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o We have been more keenly aware of the need to reassure students from the start about the (perceived) difficulties of the course
- o We have been more proactive in developing reflective practices in our new students

Claire Geddes and Maria Lee, R11

5. Exploring TMA Feedback

(DD201)

What did you do?

- o I sent a questionnaire to all DD201 students in Region 12 in an attempt to gain a better insight into the different ways in which they respond to and utilise written TMA feedback.
- o I then used this information to inform the marking of subsequent assignments and to help me provide more individualistic feedback
- o The questionnaire was also designed to encourage students to reflect upon the advice they receive and to employ it more effectively

What did you discover?

- o That many students experience considerable anxiety and apprehension regarding TMA feedback (particularly at the beginning of a course) and the feedback they receive can have a significant impact on their levels of self-confidence
- o That different students require different types of feedback (both in terms of tone and content) and that having a clearer picture of their educational background (including their hopes and fears), puts you in a better position to target your advice to meet their individual needs
- o That students employ TMA feedback in many different ways and that if the links between individual TMAs are highlighted and made explicit, students are likely to make more effective use of the advice given on previous assignments

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o I now aim to incorporate this questionnaire into my teaching practice as a matter of routine and to use this process to improve the quality of my feedback
- o I will now make a more deliberate effort to target my feedback to individual student's needs based upon the information I have received (both from the questionnaire and from their previous assignments)
- o I will now try to relate my TMA comments more explicitly to the learning outcomes of the course and also to provide a greater balance between assignment-specific advice and more general feedback

Ciaran Acton, R12

6. Distance teaching of visual material on art history courses

(A216 Art and its Histories, A316 Modern Art: Practice and Debates)

What did you do?

- o I told students about the project from the outset and kept them involved by asking for specific feedback from them (in the form of reflective comments, not tick boxes) at points throughout the course
- o I made a point of addressing this aspect of course work in script and PT3 comments, drawing attention to examples of 'good practice' in course materials to which all students have access
- o I encouraged students to develop their skills of visual analysis and selection of suitable examples at the appropriate level for them

What did you discover?

- o Involving students and making them aware of the issues I was interested in researching and why I thought they were important had the effect of making them more aware of, and interested in, these aspects themselves. This in turn led, in many cases, to an impression that students were 'taking charge' more positively of this area of competence, and felt able to reflect on it thoughtfully at defined points in the year
- o Gallery visits were a very important part of the tutorial programme in reinforcing visual learning, and it is worth developing ways of encouraging independent visits by 'remote' students

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o Together with input from the students, I am working on a list of local gallery resources
- o I will incorporate the feedback questionnaires used last year into this year's teaching programme
- o I would like to follow up some of the supplementary questions raised as I set about answering my initial ones. This will, I think, become an iterative process
- o I have incorporated some ideas based on last year's feedback into early tutorials for new courses AA318 and A840

Veronica Davies, R10

7. Supporting third level students' understanding of critical evaluation

(D317)

What did you do?

- o Sent out questionnaires at the beginning of the course to explore students' understanding of critical evaluation
- o Focused my teaching more explicitly on this skill
- o Sent out questionnaires at the end of the course to get feedback on my teaching of critical evaluation and on development of students' understanding

What did you discover?

- o Most students were keen to develop their understanding of critical evaluation skills and made explicit use of the learning opportunities offered throughout the year
- o A few students still found these skills difficult to articulate
- o Explicit advice on PT3s seemed particularly important.

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o I am planning to maintain an explicit focus on these skills in future teaching years and will continue to work on ways of making these rather abstract skills accessible to students

Annette Thomson, R11

8. Understanding Cities – An evaluation of the course essay

(DD304)

What did you do?

The research was based on quantitative analysis of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews over a two year period. I aimed to:

- o See how tutors can help students prepare more effectively for the examinable course essay
- o Evaluate the verification process
- o Compare this form of assessment with an exam

What did you discover?

- o This form of assessment encourages and necessitates a range of learning skills that are not the same as those required in exam preparation
- o It is important that tutors integrate those skills into tutorials from early on in the course
- o This form of assessment is regarded positively (some caveats) and is good preparation for post-graduate study

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o Tutorials will emphasize the skills requirements of the course essay from the onset of the course
- o Skills, despite this being third level, should be very much part of tutorials (e.g. use of sub-headings, looking at different literacy requirements of course readings, etc.)

Isobel Shelton, R05

9. Project work and research skills – a pilot study targeting Level Three project students

(Ecology S328)

What did you do?

- o A voluntary entry questionnaire was circulated to fifteen level 3 project students undertaking Ecology (S328) in the Spring of 2003 to investigate/ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of the students in the areas of the necessary skills to undertake project work
- o The initial questionnaire asked student to rate their experience and confidence in the following areas: field study skills and research, practical lab-based research experience, general hypothesis testing and sampling design, conduction of literature reviews, statistical analysis of data, use of library and web-based research, writing reports and papers, use of editorial skills and it also provided space for qualitative comments
- o Upon completion of the project, a final questionnaire was sent to the students asking them how they felt about their experience and confidence in the same skills after having undertaken a research project

What did you discover?

- o Under the various skills categories most students rated that they had some experience at the start, but after completion of the project, many students rated the majority of categories as 'good', which was quite an improvement
- o The trend showed an improvement in field and practical lab-based research, literature reviews and statistical analysis skills
- o The students' level of confidence improved in several areas after completion of the project, including statistical analysis, writing reports and papers, and their editorial skills
- o The students' qualitative comments reflected some skills at the start, but after completion of the project some students were keen to express their improved confidence with regard to tackling project work e.g. 'Main skills developed have been in the area of designed the project, analysing and writing up the data'. 'The field course was well designed to give students the skills necessary to tackle the project'. 'OU project guide excellent'

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o I shall use the results from this research to tailor project work tuition at tutorials and when guiding individual project students now that I know the areas that clearly cause anxiety at the start
- o I have already and shall continue to use these key questions here as focus points for tuition, so that the students can gain the most benefit from a course involving project work, and end up better researchers confident to progress to further research and study

Rachel Ferris, R02

10. An investigation of how students felt about doing the TMAs for D820

What did you do?

- o I sent out a questionnaire to students before each of the three TMAs
- o I used the findings in my comments on the PT3 form
- o I gave feedback on the course team after TMA01 and also sent general feedback to the students after TMA01 and 02

What did you discover?

- o I discovered that students found TMA01 difficult and stressful and very time consuming
- o I found that some very able students were very nervous and lacking in confidence about their work
- o I found out how individual students felt about a particular TMA

What did you, or will you, change as a result of your enquiry?

- o I changed my style of commenting on PT3 to build in students' comments on questionnaire and was careful to look back at previous PT3s before completing the current one
- o In 2004 I sent the actual questionnaire with comments back to the students
- o The course team have built in some changes to the timetable at the start of the course as a result of student feedback

Jenny Meegan, R12

2.5 A note on different methodologies

As you may have noted, we have throughout been referring to action research as an approach or a process, not a method. Your research can, therefore, draw upon virtually any 'method' and you can use any number of research 'tools' to assist you with your data collection. Some tools, which have proven effective in action research projects in educational contexts, are:

- Audio, photographic and video records
- Case studies
- Diaries, journals or logs
- Documentary evidence
- Field notes
- Interaction analysis
- Interviews (in person or by telephone)
- Participant and non-participant observation
- Questionnaires
- Rating Scales
- Sociograms

You may be familiar with some if not all of these tools and may decide to use any one or any combination of those listed. The list is far from complete and it is not the place here to go into this in any depth, but you will find a more detailed discussion in Section 3.2 on different methods used in action research. If you need more information, any good publication on research methodology in education should be of help; some useful sources are included in Section 4.

Before you carry out your own inquiry, if you have not embarked on something like this before, take some time to consider the methods that are familiar to you. For example:

- What sort of information or data do they produce?
- How might you make sense of or analyse this information?
- What might be the advantages or pitfalls?
- What other methods might be useful?

2.6 Guidelines for good practice

If you have now decided to embark on an action research project with your students and possibly with a colleague, here are some simple guidelines on good practice in action research.

1. Decide, in consultation with colleagues and students where possible, what question you want to explore.
2. Work out the details of your methodology (with colleagues if appropriate) and discuss with your students what you are planning to do and why.
3. Make sure that whatever enquiry you plan to undertake is with your own students and with those of any colleague with whom you are working.
4. Make sure your enquiry methods do not disrupt your students' study in any way. If possible, what you plan to do should enhance it.
5. Make sure your students know that you will preserve their anonymity and that you will quote from their responses only with their permission.
6. Make it quite clear that involvement in any enquiry is voluntary and any student who wishes to opt out of the activity is perfectly at liberty to do so.
7. When you have collected evidence from your students, share your findings with them and explain the implications of these, both for them and for future cohorts of students.

You may want to check your plans with your staff tutor who may know if other tutors in your region are engaging in similar enquiries. Some regions are setting up networks of ALs who are interested in action research so that knowledge and experience of this approach can be shared. Check if one exists in your region. Talk to colleagues about their experiences or read some reports of action research carried out by others. These are available on the AR website – <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/cobe/action-research/>

2.7 Ethical issues

Most of these are summarised in the guidelines for good practice above. However, it is worth reiterating that there are ethical issues that apply as much to action research as to any other form of research that involves working with human subjects.

Consent

As a tutor researching with your own allocated group of students, obtaining their consent is fairly straightforward, but when, say, two tutors agree to pair up and do an action research project with their respective groups, issues of confidentiality arise. In this case, students' consent to the pooling of material should be obtained.

Students may withhold consent for numerous reasons. They might, for example, feel reluctant to be in a group that is undergoing what they see as 'experimental treatment' or they may feel it will add to an already heavy workload. Whether researchers should ask for their reasons is another issue, but whatever these may be, explicit or not, they must be respected.

Should consent be limited to specific cycles or spirals of the action research process over limited periods of time? The Data Protection legislation applies when personal details of students are recorded in some way, manually as well as electronically. As all tutors are advised, their student group allocation is time limited and usually destroyed after the course is completed and examination results have been notified. This means that no personal details of students involved in action research activities should be recorded and all data must be treated anonymously.

Confidentiality

Students should be told what will happen to the data they provide or to any materials - such as copies of their assignments - they agree to release. All such materials must be anonymous with all personal details removed. They should be told who will see the materials and reassured that copies will be destroyed when the project ends. Material for publication will need to be scrutinised with care for potentially identifiable aspects of individual students and tutors. This may be particularly acute with project work and high-level courses where the student cohort is relatively small and individual characteristics, such as a student's occupation, could easily lead to identification. Quotations taken from students' and tutors' written work could also be identifiable by style.

Whose stake?

There is also the issue of whose stake is held in the research. If the purpose of the doing a piece of action research is partly to enhance the AL's opportunity for accreditation as a teacher in Higher Education, in whose interests is 'participatory' research actually taking place? The University's need for 'qualified staff' and the AL's continuing need to stay employable are factors that must be acknowledged as part of the equation.

The nature of the relationships between an AL and the OU as employer, or between an AL and their students, might involve conflicts of interest. For example, students may worry that what they say might be used against them (see Pfeffer, 2002, Personal Communication). The same anxiety could apply equally to ALs, perhaps feeling that they are being exposed and judged on their teaching ability.

Quality of research

It can be argued that it is unethical not to monitor and audit the quality of educational research. The area of action research, with its very broad range of definitions and quality of applications, is more contentious. Here we could argue that it would be unethical to produce 'research' that was merely quality assurance, or which applied methods unskillfully. Action research, like any other research, entails systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry. Its principal aim is the improvement of professional practice, but also to contribute in some way, however small, to the advancement of knowledge.

One of the several aims of our work with ALs is to enable a process of linking people with experience in action research projects in the Open University, to other ALs who wish to undertake such research. We hope that networks can be put in place so that the necessary research skills are learned and shared in a supportive way.

You may want to get on with your own research project now and perhaps return to Section 3 when you have completed it.

Section 3

Further information on action research

3.1 The history and scope of action research

As Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) point out in the introduction to their chapter on action research:

‘One of the founding figures of action research, Kurt Lewin (1952), remarked that research which produced nothing but books was inadequate. The task, as Marx suggests in his Theses on Feuerbach, is not merely to understand and interpret the world, but to change it.’ (op cit p.226)

The action research movement thus grew from a conviction that research should not only be, as Vulliamy (1990) says, ‘useful’, but that it should be focused on change and improvement. It should, as Bogdan and Biklen (1982) note, be aimed at:

‘...the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change.’ (p.213).

As Cohen et al (op cit) go on to point out, it is the very combination of action and research that not only makes action research an attractive approach for practitioners, but because the results of the research stem directly from action and are then incorporated into action by the researcher-practitioner, it is particularly appropriate for those of us who wish to change and improve our practice.

As we have indicated, the term ‘action research’ can be interpreted quite broadly. Its history is of relevance: Bentz and Shapiro (1998) traced its origin to ‘two independent sources – Kurt Lewin, a person of science, and John Collier, a person of practical affairs.’ They emphasised different aspects of inquiry. Lewin (1946) argued that ‘realistic fact finding and evaluation are prerequisites for any learning’, whereas Collier (1945) stressed ‘the requirement for cooperation among the administrator, the scientist and the layperson’ (Bentz and Shapiro pp.127-8). Bentz and Shapiro comment that ‘early studies ... were more concerned with changing the behaviour of persons or organisations in a specific direction than in using action research as a means of participant problem solving.’

They held that it was Paolo Freire who later ‘developed a form of inquiry he called “participatory” action research.’ The authors provide examples of this sort of work where the researcher:

‘...act[s] as a facilitator of a process of inquiry involving as many stakeholders in the situation as wish to be involved. Ideally, these stakeholders will be involved in the research design, data gathering, data analysis, and implementation of action steps resulting from the research. (Bentz and Shapiro, 1998, p.128)

Questions can, of course, be raised about the identity politics of the ‘facilitator’/ ‘researcher’. This can be particularly acute in the increasingly popular area of ‘practitioner’ research, which has been promoted positively across health and social welfare systems. The uneven balance of power, between professional and client, needs to be addressed openly in this sort of research so that the appearance of participation is not a mere gloss.

Paolo Freire’s work with adult literacy is particularly interesting in his emphasis on the basic questioning of the subject that the teacher teaches, as part of the process of education. The preface to *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972) lays out Freire’s:

‘...fundamental thesis: that there is no neutral education. Education is either for domestication or for freedom. Although it is customarily conceived as a conditioning process, education can equally be an instrument for deconditioning. An initial choice is required of the educator (da Veiga Coutinho, 1972, p.9)

How is this ‘deconditioning’ to be done? A key role is:

*‘... to be played by the revolutionary educator, **whose task is to challenge both the students and the reality that is to be studied.**’ (da Veiga Coutinho, 1972, p.9, our emphasis.)*

This notion echoes much of what Eric Sotro says in *When Teaching Becomes Learning* (1994) and, in practical terms, resonates with some of the action research projects undertaken in the OU Scottish region on ‘transferable skills’ training in science (George and Cowan, 1999.)

The systematic recording of what actually happens in working circumstances can be a powerful political tool. The same can be said of studies of the 'mismatch' between what is textbook pedagogic 'good practice' and what actually happens. Several of the OU action research projects with students have highlighted unexpected findings. These have altered the perceptions of both tutors and students as to what is actually going on. This, in consequence has led to changes in practice. (George and Cowan, 1997; George, 2001.)

The antecedents of participatory research are much older. For example, we can look back into the mid-nineteenth century and Marx' recruitment of 'a volunteer sample from the *Revue Socialiste*' to

*'... fill in one hundred open-ended questions about their conditions of work (Weiss, 1936). **The intention of the questionnaire was to raise important questions in the minds of those who answered them**, as well as to provide information for the investigator, so the questions are not at all neutral. One question, for example, asked workers to consider whether those who worked in the so-called profit-sharing industries could go on strike "or are they only permitted to be the humble servants of their masters?" Marx had in mind that the results could be presented as cahiers du travail like the cahiers de doléances of the French Revolution, and would form an agitational basis for "preparing a reconstruction of society" (Marsh, 1985, p.213, our emphasis.)*

The very title of Marsh's paper, Informants, respondents and citizens, indicates the nature of her discussion of the relationship of the subject/object in research. In the Open University context, most people would agree with the 21st century notion of our students as 'citizens' and consumers of our services, whilst accepting at the same time that long debates and disagreements could be had about the subtle differences in the meanings of these words. Marsh was writing in the early 1980s about the potential for a further democratisation of research practice and agendas that could be made possible by the developing electronic world.

Action research in schools

The teachers' Action Research Movement conceives of teaching as research and of the teacher as researcher (see, for example, Stenhouse, 1975, 1985; McNiff, 1988; Nunan, 1990; Elliot, 1991.) A number of advocates of action research, however, place more emphasis on the 'research' element. As Kemmis and McTaggart say (op cit), it should be more '**systematic**' than teaching. Stenhouse (1985) suggests that Action Research 'should be characterized by systematic self-enquiry' (p8, our emphasis) and should contribute to 'a theory of education and teaching which is accessible to all teachers.' (1975, cited in Cohen and Manion, 1989, p.217.)

McNiff (1988) suggests that action research should encourage:

*'...teachers to develop theories and rationales for their practice and to give reasoned justification for their public claims to professional knowledge.' (p.6) and that '...it is this systematic **enquiry made public** which distinguishes the activity as research.'* (ibid, author's original emphasis.)

The degree to which we wish to prioritise this 'research' element depends very much on our reasons for undertaking the action research project. If our principal purpose is to bring about an improvement to a 'local' situation, for example, to improve an element of our own practice in a particular situation, then we will probably wish to downplay the 'research' element. If we are aiming at any kind of generalisation, however, either to other contexts within which we operate professionally or to those of fellow professionals, the 'research' element and its associated necessity for some theoretical underpinning is likely to loom far larger.

Whatever our primary purpose for undertaking an action research project, the common thread in all of the above writers is that action research, though often small-scale, is nonetheless research. As we stated earlier, this therefore entails systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry, which aims not only to contribute in some way, however small, to the advancement of knowledge, but equally importantly in an OU context, leads to the improvement of professional practice.

Schools of action research

Consideration of the different purposes for undertaking action research returns us to our earlier comment that there are different schools of action research. While this is not the place to go into these in any detail, it may be useful to identify two broadly opposed approaches identified by Kemmis (1997). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) summarise the two ends of the action research continuum as follows:

‘On the one hand are long-time advocates of action research such as Elliott (e.g. 1978; 1991) who are in the tradition of Schwab and Schön and who emphasize reflective practice; this is a particularly powerful field of curriculum research with notions of the “teacher-as-researcher” (Stenhouse, 1975, and *The Reflective Practitioner*, Schön, 1983, 1987.) On the other hand there are advocates in the “critical” action research model, e.g. Carr and Kemmis (1986).’ (op cit. p.231.)

For those of you who would like to know more, there is a good overview of the distinction between these and of action research as ‘critical praxis’, in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, 231 ff). However, in summary, they identify three possible approaches:

Technical Action Research: typically undertaken by individual practitioners on a relatively short-term basis and aimed at making ‘an existing situation more efficient and effective’.

Practical Action Research: which is ‘...*designed to promote teachers’ professionalism by drawing upon their informed judgement. It is akin to Schön’s ‘reflection-on-action’ and is a hermeneutic activity of understanding and interpreting social situations with a view to their improvement.*’

Emancipatory Action Research: ‘...*which is political as it is educational ... [and] seeks to develop their understanding of illegitimate structural and interpersonal constraints that are preventing the exercise of their autonomy and freedom.*’

Although we do not wish to downplay the importance of the third approach, it is more likely that action research undertaken by Associate Lecturers will fall into one of the first two. Further, while not wishing to discourage you from adopting the first approach, it is often criticised for not relating practice to wider considerations and for being too focused upon an individual practitioner and an individual context.

The second approach has other attractions. As noted, it draws upon Schön’s (1983; 1987) ideas of ‘the reflective practitioner’ and ‘reflection-on-action’: the active and critical consideration and reflection by us, as practitioners, on such aspects as the motives behind and the consequences of our professional practice. This is achieved through a process of action-reflection-action and is what permits us as teachers to analyse our practice, both for ourselves and for others, and thus to change and develop.

3.2 Different methods used in action research

Colleagues who are not familiar with action research may recognise other allied approaches to educational research, from the simplest use of feedback questionnaires from their students, through to approaches such as John Heron and Peter Reason’s *Human Inquiry in Action* (1988), which involve full-blown, cooperative inquiry. Colleagues who have studied courses such as *Personal and Career Development: A portfolio approach*, or *Professional Judgement and Decision Making*, will be familiar with concepts such as Kolb’s learning cycle and Schön’s notion of reflexive practice. These latter ideas seem to have straddled the disciplines of management, education, practitioner development in health and social welfare and can be found in course materials in various faculties. Other members of OU staff will have encountered them in OU materials for the accreditation of teaching in HE. (Section 4 details some of these resources in Open University materials.)

It is generally recognised that there is no one method that is ‘right’ for action research. Any method could be used. What makes a piece of research ‘action research’, as opposed to mere audit or evaluation, is the commitment to change. As Bentz and Shapiro (1998) state:

‘Action research is less a separate culture of inquiry than it is a statement of intention and values. The intention is to change a system, and the values are those of participation, self-determination, empowerment through knowledge, and change.’

Given this as the broad aim, the choice of method may be more to do with the nature of the problem that one is seeking to understand and explain. For example, if there is genuine uncertainty about two approaches to teaching something, it may be appropriate to set up an experiment where one group of students is taught by one method, and the other by another.

The parameters surrounding experimental method do not need to be adhered to, in the sense of creating a ‘closed system’ with matched groups and no extraneous variables. To make such an approach participatory, the students need to know about the methods and give their informed consent to be allocated arbitrarily to either group. Their feedback, both from the subjective experience and the objective measures set up to test after the learning experience, can be analysed by both tutor and students.

Surveys have been very widely used in social and educational research. To make them participatory they should ideally involve the students from the earliest stages of design, from the choice of topic through the choice and wording of questions and the execution of the survey and its analysis, whether quantitative or qualitative, structured or open-ended. People who have not had to analyse questionnaire-produced data often assume that question writing is unproblematic. On the contrary, this is an area that requires considerable skill, developed through practice and pilot studies.

All varieties of interview, from one-to-one to focus group, can be used in participatory ways. The analysis of interview material is also considerably more challenging and time-consuming than many people realise.

Content and discourse analysis could be used to examine the dialogues that occur in correspondence tuition, whether through pen and paper or electronic communication.

Observational and participant observational studies can also be organised in an action research context. Sometimes it can be useful for ALs to reflect on their own experiences as students in the Open University system (a staff development option). This can lead to useful analyses of the lecturer/student relationships by focusing on the problems around correspondence tuition, meeting deadlines, tutorial participation and so on, that are particular to the demands of the distance learning environment.

General categories of method

In the Open University, tutor support materials offer many specific examples of approaches to assessment of the educational process. A useful list appears in Appendix 1 to the Open Teaching Toolkit: How do I know I am doing a good job? (Hewitt, Lentell, Phillips and Stevens, 1997, pp. 34-36.) This gives a 'Range of Methods Available', starting with the idea of an 'Action Research Network' described as:

'A group of colleagues (perhaps those who are responsible for a course) agree to work together as a network to improve teaching/learning. Collaboration and networking imply a willingness to communicate and to share ideas and professional practice, disseminate outcomes, engage in critical reflection [and] produce resources in partnerships.' (p.34.)

Also listed are routine aspects of Open University practice, such as 'Monitoring of correspondence tuition'. The latter could lend itself to specific action research projects akin to those described in the publications of George and Cowan, which detail approaches used in specific projects.

Three levels of action research as proposed by Peter Reason

In *Creative Management* (ed. Henry, 2001), Reason's paper '*Learning and change through Action Research*' identifies three broad strategies. These may be helpful to ALs considering possible levels of engagement with such work:

'First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting.' (Reason, in Henry, 2001, p.185.)

We can relate these ideas to notions of the 'reflective practitioner' commonly found in management, health, social welfare and other decision-making situations where the reflection is based on evidence and leads to action.

Reason's second level involves others:

'Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to face with others into issues of mutual concern – for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice... [It] is also concerned with how to create communities of inquiry or learning organisations.' (ibid.)

This is exemplified by the networking over action research, which is being encouraged in the OU through staff development meetings, where participants are paired or grouped to discuss possible small-scale projects. Here the ALs carrying out the enquiry determine the nature of the research and the methods used.

Larger and longer-term examples in the Open University include the Higher Education Learning Development Project (George, 2001), which brought together associate lecturers from various regions and students from different courses. Here the research methods were determined before the participants were recruited, although both tutors and students had considerable freedom in how they responded.

Second level activity could well merge into Reason's third level, especially given the continuing development of electronic communication:

'Third-person research practice aims to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality.' (ibid.)

Reason points out that 'the fullest kind of action research will engage all three strategies' and it is easy to imagine this possibility in the Open University context.

Collaborative approaches to action research

As noted in our discussion above, collaboration is often highlighted as a desirable feature of action research and indeed, some writers, such as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), argue that the approach is action research only when it is collaborative.

Carr and Kemmis (1986) interpret this by saying that an action research project should involve:

'...those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation of the project gradually to include others affected by the practice, and maintaining collaborative control of the process.' (pp.165-6)

However we interpret the word 'collaborative', for example as collaboration between practitioners or as collaboration between one tutor and the students involved in the enquiry, a collaborative approach to action research has attractions. When the research is undertaken in collaboration with colleagues it not only addresses our perennial problem - the 'loneliness of the AL'- but there are other advantages too. These are summarised by Burns (1999) as follows:

'Collaborative action research processes strengthen the opportunities for the results of research on practice to be fed back into educational systems in a more substantial and critical way. They have the advantage of encouraging teachers to share common problems and to work cooperatively as a research community to examine their existing assumptions, values and beliefs within the socio-political cultures of the institutions within which they work. Policies and practices within the organisation are more likely to be opened up to change when such changes are brought about through group processes and collective pressures.' (p.13.)

Although Burns is here describing teachers working within schools (as are many of the writers cited thus far) what she says applies equally to our own teaching and learning context.

Some constraints on action research

Inevitably there are constraints when undertaking action research. Indeed, the 'loneliness' referred to above may be a very important constraint in our context. McKernan (1991) has identified others that typically are faced by educational action researchers. The major constraints he identifies are likely to be only too familiar to us: 'lack of time, lack of resources, school organization such as timetabling, and lack of research skills...' (pp.44-5). Other relevant constraints he identifies are the language of research and the personal beliefs governing the role of the teacher.

Although there is no easy way to remove these constraints, it is perhaps as well to be aware of them. This guide is an initial attempt to respond to the problem of acquiring the necessary skills to carry out an action research project in practice and to facilitate collaboration where possible.

3.3 Theory and practice

In conventional research activities it is customary to explore the previous literature relating to the subject you are studying and, in many cases, that informs the design of your enquiry. It is also expected that you will relate your findings to some of the theories that inform the topic. This is particularly important if you are looking to publish your work externally. Action research takes a rather different approach to the relationship between theory and practice and to the ways in which 'knowledge' informs our approach to our teaching.

If you examine your own practice – perhaps in the way you prepare for and organise a tutorial, give feedback on a student's assignment or respond to your students' electronically – you will be drawing on a range of 'knowledge' that you hold on how your practice can enhance your students' learning. Most of that knowledge will be 'tacit'. Unless you are either new to the task or meet an unexpected challenge, you don't keep asking yourself 'how shall I do this?' or 'why do I do it in this way?' If you are then asked those questions explicitly, you will probably be able to articulate your answer drawing on various theories of learning, examples of good practice and your own experience. Thus articulated this is what is sometimes called your 'espoused' knowledge and it is important, as a professional practitioner, that you do have a rationale for what you do. (Both Argyris and Schön, 1978 and Eraut, 1994, explore this distinction.)

If you are faced with a new challenge in your OU work – say a student who seems to have a specific difficulty with an aspect of the course or an assignment that is so poor that giving useful feedback is a daunting task - what do you do? You may draw on your own expertise and previous experience, you may discuss it with a colleague or ask for advice from another member of OU staff. It is unlikely that you will reach for a book on educational theory. However, if you read subsequently about theories of teaching or about research findings on student learning you may find that your own knowledge and experience make sense against examples in the academic literature and that, in turn, ideas from more formal research and theoretical writing reinforce and enhance your own practice.

In action research you do not need to start with an extensive knowledge of educational theory nor be familiar with all the relevant research findings. Your research into your own practice is a valid enquiry and the action that is part of - or follows - your enquiry is justified provided you can articulate the rationale that informs any subsequent change in your practice. However, you can see that collaborative research, where you explore, challenge and discuss your approach, your findings and your explanations with others, is likely to be more rigorous than your own individual exploration.

Just as you do not need to be familiar with research or experienced in research methodologies before you start, so in action research you do not need explore the theory before you frame your enquiry. However, it may be that the experience of conducting that enquiry through planning, taking action, exploring, observing and reflection, leads you to want to find out ideas and evidence from other people's work. You can start your exploration of theory and research by looking at the SOL Theoretical Reader or by being part of a small 'reflective reading group' where three or four ALs agree to find, read and discuss relevant materials related to a topic of their choice. The OU Library can advise on finding and accessing appropriate resources for this; the AR website <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/cobe/action-research/> lists some of the topics and associated reading that other reflective reading groups have explored.

Section 4

Resources for associate lecturers who want to engage in action research

4.1 OU resources on action research

Please note that the resources below are available from the OU Library and held in most regional centre libraries. All the courses listed were in presentation in 2005.

Open Business School

Henry, J. (ed.) (2001). *Creative Management Reader*, especially Reason, P. (2001). 'Learning and change through Action Research', pp.182-194

Education

E300 Researching Language and Literacy in a Social Context

The first three articles in the Reader describe principles and approaches to research, including action research. The following is an example of an action research project:

Naidoo, B. 'Through Whose Eyes?: exploring racism through literature with white students', pp. 64-81

E835 Educational Research in Action

Walford, G (ed.) (1995). *Doing Educational Research*. The Reader provides a review of research in education. In particular, it is interested in a variety of approaches to research, describing how the process was managed in addition to its results.

The Off Prints Reader (1995) has some useful material about research in action, especially Stenhouse, L. (1975). 'The Teacher as Researcher', and Weiner, G. (1989). 'Professional self-knowledge versus social justice: a critical analysis of the teacher-researcher movement'

Health and Social Welfare

Hart, E. & Bond, M. (1995). *Action research for health and social care: a guide to practice*. Buckingham, Open University Press

K302 Critical Practice in Health and Social Care

The Readers for the course are all useful.

Davies, C., Finlay, L. & Bullman, A. (eds.) (2000). *Changing practice in health and social care*. London, Sage. This collection is designed to support those interested in changing their practice, though is not focused specifically on action research.

Gomm, R. & Davies, C. (eds.) (2000). *Using evidence in health and social care*, especially Chapter 5, Hart, E. & Bond, B. 'Using action research', pp. 86-107

Gomm, R., Needham, G. & Bullman, A. (eds.) *Evaluating Research in Health and Social Care*, especially Winter, C. (1996). 'Action Research: Applied Qualitative Methods in the Family Centre', pp. 239-246. There is also a resource chapter, pp.272-77, and a section on 'Questions to ask about action research', pp.311-3.

Other OU publications

Cowan, J. & George, J. (1999). *Ten Years of Action Research. A reflective review 1987-1997*. The Open University in Scotland

George, J. (2001). *Higher Education Development Project. Final Report*

Hewitt, P., Lentell, H., Phillips, M. & Stevens, V. (1997). *How do I know I am doing a good job?* Open Teaching Toolkit. This is available online via TutorHome or in hard copy from your Regional Centre.

The Open University Press

The OU Press publishes a series of Research Guides that you might find useful. For convenience these are listed below rather than embedded in the bibliography that follows. OU Press is not part of the University; their publications, for loan or purchase, have to be obtained through the same channels as any other externally published book.

- Bell, J. (1999). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in Education and Social Science*
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. & Tight, M. (2001). *How to research*
- Cryer, P. 2000. *The Research Student's Guide to Success*
- Denscombe, M. (2002). *Ground Rules for Good Research: A 10-point guide for social researchers*
- Denscombe, M. (2003). *The Good Research Guide: for small-scale research projects*
- Oliver, P. (2003). *The Students' Guide to Research Ethics*

4.2 Bibliography

(Items in bold are in the OU library and are particularly recommended for those less familiar with action research.)

- Allwright, D & Bailey, K.M. (1991). *Focus on the Language Classroom: An Introduction to Classroom Research for Language Teachers*. Cambridge, CUP
- Argyris, C. & Schon, D. (1978). *Organisational learning: a theory-of-action perspective*. Reading, MA. Addison, Wesley, Longman
- Banks, F. & Mayes, A.S. (2001). *Early Professional Development for Teachers*. David Fulton and the Open University
- Banks, F. et al. (2001). E853 *Early professional development for teachers: study guide*. Open University
- Bentz, V.M. & Shapiro, J. (1998). *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research*. London, Sage
- Bogdan, R.C. & Biklen, S.K. (1982). *Qualitative Research for Education: an introduction to theory & methods*. London, Allyn & Bacon
- Brumfit, C. & Mitchell, R. (eds.) (1990). *ELT Documents 133: Research in the Language Classroom*. London, MEP/British Council
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4.3 Resources and references available on the Web

OU library resources

The online library resources are available from your AL Home page, at http://library.open.ac.uk/services/al_services.html.

Academic Search Elite (EBSCO) provides full text of articles and you can do a key word search on the resources online. It can be accessed via <http://library.open.ac.uk/resources/databases.html#list>. You will need a password, but the resources from your AL Home page will give you the details.

The Voyager catalogue is the catalogue for resources that you can ask for from the OU Library by post and can be accessed from <http://voyager.open.ac.uk/>.

You can search for information via ROUTES, on <http://routes.open.ac.uk/ROUTES/index.html>, which will give you either the chance to search by subject or by index (in this case, 'research methods; research funding' seemed the most useful).

OU library staff are extremely helpful and encouraging and library services for ALs are continually developing.

We welcome additions from the OU resources particularly, and other texts as well when they are of especial interest to the context of lecturers who are considering action research projects.

Other resources available on the web

Please note: if you are tempted to seek resources on the web, be warned that keying in the words 'action research in education' on its own pulls up more than two million references! We think the following are the most relevant:

A beginner's guide:

[http://ousd.k12.ca.us/netday/links/Actio ... action_research](http://ousd.k12.ca.us/netday/links/Actio...action_research)

Action Research Methodology:

<http://www.web.net/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html>

Action Research Resources:

www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html

Background to Action Research and Articles on Action Research:

www.cudenver.edu/~mryder/act_res.html

CARN: Collaborative Action Research Network:

www.uea.ac.uk/care/cam

Internet Resources for Participatory Action Research:

<http://goshen.edu/soan/soan96.htm>

References on Action Research:

<http://www.misq.org/misqd961/isworld/action.htm>

http://www.cis.gsu.edu/~baskerv/CAIS_2_19/CAIS_2_19.html

<http://www.hta.nhsweb.nhs.uk/execsumm/summ523.htm>

CERES (Consumers for Ethics in Research)

info@ceres.org.uk or <http://www.ceres.org.uk>

