

All You Need to Know About Action Research

All You Need to Know About Action Research. By Jean McNiff & Jack Whitehead. New York: London: Sage, 2006.

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In *All You Need to Know About Action Research*, the authors offer a detailed definition of action research as well as a detail of the research process involved in action research. The focus of the 274 page book can be divided into four themes:

1. Know what action research is.
2. Understand the underpinnings of action research. The authors provide justification for its validity as a research paradigm.
3. Understand why action research is important and why it should appeal to all researchers.
4. Let us show you the details of how to conduct action research.

The book is organized in seven logically sequenced parts. Part 1 details what the reader needs to know about what action research is all about and who is best poised to conduct action research. Part 2 explains why it is important to do action research and its potential contribution to learning. Parts 3 through 7 describes the details of each step necessary to perform action research. It begins with feasibility analysis (planning) of the topic to be researched which progresses into developing an action plan (Part 3). Part 6 discusses the various ways to disseminate the knowledge gained from the research, while Part 7 concludes the text by presenting a motivational discussion of the fact that you, the reader, have the potential to exercise transformative influence on the education of social formations in significant ways. Expressed in simpler terms, that means that you, the action researcher, can convince others that they can learn from you and thus changing the established practices for the better. This is the premise on which action research is based – learning from practice with the goal of creating knowledge that improves practice.

The authors cast action research as one based on one's own practical theories of practice, from which others may learn from. Action research is done by practitioners who learn better ways to do what it is they do and then document their process of improvement as well as what they learned from the practice. This type of research requires the practitioner to take note of what is going on, identify any concerns, formulate possible ways forward, implement it, test the validity of learning accounts, and modify practice in the light of the evaluation. The authors, so eloquently, state that "The purpose of action research is to generate living theories about how learning has improved practice and is informing new practices."

The book is written in an easy-to-follow pattern in recognition that the readers may all be at various levels of research (including non-action type research paradigm). The authors also recognize the need to ensure the reader has a solid grasp on the meaning of action research to the extent that the purpose and meaning of action research is constantly repeated throughout the text. Some readers may find this to be monotonous and unnecessary, especially after initially gaining that understanding. In my opinion, even though the text does not sound disjointed, I think such a repetition was important for subsequent few

chapters only as a way to introduce each of those chapters. The detailed repetition within those chapters was not quite as necessary.

Action research paradigm is not suited for comparative studies, or studies that show statistical correlations or even demonstrate a cause and effect relationship. While other research paradigms answer the questions about how “other” people do things, action research focuses on “how do I understand what I am doing”, “how do I improve it”. It places the emphasis on the researcher’s intent to make a difference in personal or even social settings and not on “other subjects”.

A very interesting perspective discussed in chapter 3 is that traditional researchers conduct research with a belief that knowledge is certain and that there is a fixed answer to everything, and that knowledge can be discovered using specific methodologies of inquiry. Action research takes on the perspective that humans are unique, unpredictable and can make own choices. Therefore, there is no one fixed answer to practice, and that knowledge is uncertain and ambiguous. To this end, action research assumes that knowledge is created and not necessarily discovered and therefore, action researchers investigate (research) their own practice with a view to improving it.

For the novice researcher, this book is an excellent resource for a detailed step by step process of conducting research, especially action research. For an experienced researcher, an outline of the steps may initially seem not quite as innovative but as one delves into the book, he/she quickly realizes that a guided process for action research is quite necessary in order to make it a purely action-based research. Chapters 9 through 25 provide a detailed explanation of how to successfully begin (planning) and complete (disseminating findings) an action-based research. Throughout these chapters the authors provide examples of real action research framework based on other researchers’ work. These examples are invaluable in helping the beginner understand how to formulate their own action research.

From an academic practice point of view, this book can be a vital force in encouraging faculty to document what it is they do in their classrooms in terms of development and implementation of new ideas. Continuous improvement in teaching is a commonplace expectation and in my view, action research can be a valued platform for informing teaching practice as faculty implement various academic innovations.