

Get Ready, Get Set, GO with Action Research!

Teacher/Practitioners as Up-Close Researchers with 3-D Graphic Organizers and VKVs®

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We are living in a time that demands evidence-based decision making at every level, a time that emphasizes articulating the research base underlying instructional decisions, and a time when our field seems to rely more than ever on commercial curriculum programs brought in through outsiders rather than **teacher-constructed, coherent curriculum and instruction driven by students' particular needs**. Thus, perhaps more than ever before, professional educators need tools and guidelines to understand existing research and to engage in research specific to their settings.

What is Action Research?

Action research can be as simple as testing a new teaching method, or it can answer far more complex questions about curriculum, school management, or other large, multidimensional issues.

Action research is the process of systematically testing new ideas in the classroom or in the school, **analyzing the results, and determining whether to implement the new idea or “tweak it” and begin the process again with another idea.**

Action research differs from formal research conducted by education theorists or educational researchers doing rigorous experimental research, because it is typically designed and controlled by the teacher him/herself or in collaboration with other practitioners.

There is a good amount of literature devoted to the subject of action research, and a variety of interpretations as to what constitutes it. The definition used here broadly defines the term.

To summarize, classroom action research is characterized by the following traits:

- ✓ **Begins with a question, such as “Why don’t my students write better notes or summarize better?”**
- ✓ Proposes a classroom-based practice (intervention) to change the identified problem, such as **“Will using a 3-D graphic organizer (Foldable) improve student note-taking skills?”**
- ✓ Uses a systematic approach to test and analyze the idea or intervention—did it improve their skills? How?
- ✓ Is teacher or practitioner directed
- ✓ Has an end goal of improving a teaching practice or other educational process

Why Conduct Action Research in Your Classroom or on Your Campus?

An inquiry stance (Erickson, 2005, p. 7) demands that teachers routinely and critically examine their practice by asking:

“What is happening here . . . and what do those happenings mean to those who are engaged in them?”

Such a stance is basic to effective teaching where teachers push every individual in their classrooms as far as they can go as learners.

Research-based efforts to improve the quality of teaching must make room for research practices that are sensitive to the complex range of situational factors that influence teaching and learning in classrooms, including teacher “action” research. Teacher research, where teachers and others work “together to investigate their own assumptions, their own teaching and curriculum development, and the policies and practices of their own schools and communities” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 281) has a vital role to play in improving practice.

Many teachers maintain that the problem with theory is that it ignores practice, the day-to-day reality of the classroom. Theory is often seen as tied to large-scale research projects designed and conducted by educational researchers with minimal or no teacher input. Of course, this research has an important place in the field of education; yet, it may be difficult to distill much of it into definable practices that will change the way we teach.

Think of good action research, on the other hand, as one of teacher practitioners’ best chances at using critical inquiry to activate change on their own terms. David Perkins asserts in his book *Smart Schools: From Training Memories to Educating Minds* (1992) that one of the necessary components for better learning is to let teachers create. He is essentially talking about action research when he maintains that “[t]eachers must be engaged in thinking and working together on assessing and improving the learning experiences they offer students versus being given teacher-proof packages to teach from verbatim.”

McGraw-Hill School Education Group offers this list of five compelling reasons to conduct at least one action research project in a given school year.

1. It helps you build a reflective practice, based on proven techniques.
2. It allows you to try out new ideas and reliably assess their effectiveness.
3. It builds confidence in your instructional decisions.
4. It contributes to the professional culture of teaching at your school.
5. **It can create meaningful and lasting change in your practice, in students’ learning, and in your educational environment.**

I will add a sixth reason: it will energize your practice.

What Types of Action Research are There?

Typically, there are three different levels of action research:

1. *Inquiry conducted by an individual* in order to test methods for implementation in the classroom.
2. *Action research undertaken by a group* that is testing a method for use departmentally or at a grade level.
3. *Action research involving teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders* having as its purpose affecting change in the larger school community.

How to Conduct Action Research: A Simple Methodology

1. Identify the question, issue, or problem.

This is always your starting point. You may need time to determine the right focus for your question.

2. Define a solution.

This will be an intervention of some sort—perhaps a technique, a new approach, such as a Foldable or a VKV to teach a troublesome concept or skill, or a fresh approach to a thematic unit. The intervention may also represent a different environment or material that you believe has potential to positively affect a challenge that you have faced.

3. Apply the intervention and collect data regarding the intervention.

Before you apply the intervention you need to define the method you will use to collect the data and systematically apply the technique. What qualitative or quantitative measures might you use? If it is possible, you will want to set up at least two groups for your inquiry: one that will be the test group and one for the control group that does not receive the intervention. You will need to define ahead of time how you will record responses to your intervention.

4. Analyze your findings.

This, of course, is where having a control group with which you compare your test group helps you determine whether the technique or intervention has caused a desirable change, an undesirable change, or no discernible difference.

5. Take appropriate action.

Action may be either in the form of revising your intervention and returning to Step 2 to either alter your strategy or test another intervention, or it may involve changing your practice to reflect a successful new approach.

Learn More About Action Research

Teachers Taking Action: A Comprehensive Guide to Teacher Research. Lasonde, Cynthia A. & Israel, Susan E., Eds. IRA, 2008.

Teacher as Researcher. ERIC Digest article. This brief article by Beverly Johnson discusses the purpose, benefits, and effects of teacher-instigated classroom research.

Leading Action Research in Schools. Project CENTRAL, Florida Department of Education. This pdf provides information about action research, and an opportunity to work through your own action research project. <http://www.fl DOE.org/ese/pdf/action-res.pdf>

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