Making Action Research more robust?

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Outline of the talk

What AR is

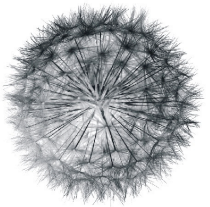
What it isn't

The 'quant-qual debate'

The arguments against AR

Locus of dispute and mitigation

The role of the researcher

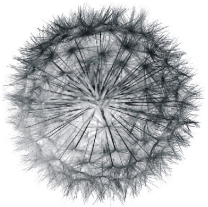


So what *is* Action Research?

A methodology in which a professional improves or develops practice in a cyclical way, by planning the next step of action as a result of analysis of the previous action or development.

It therefore involves reflective practice.

It is distinct from other forms of research in that the professional looks at his or her own practice, and develops an aspect of it, rather than producing new knowledge.



What does it involve?

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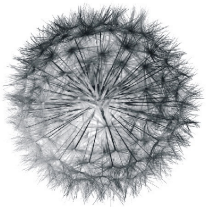
Action Research *isn't . . .*

- a randomised control trial
- always intended to 'prove something'
- always objective
- research 'done to' teachers or lecturers
- a new idea



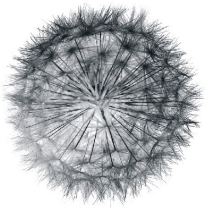
The ‘Quant-Qual’ debate

Quantitative

- Data is hard, rigorous, credible & scientific
- Experimentally controlled conditions
- Objective – data are independent of people’s perceptions
- Particularistic – pre-defined variables are investigated

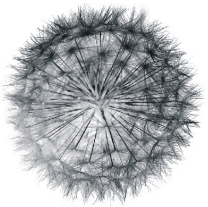
Qualitative

- Data is sensitive, nuanced, detailed and contextual
- Social, complex, non-laboratory settings
- Subjective – data are perceptions of subjects in the environment
- Holistic – complete picture is sought



Arguments against Action Research

1. Lack of time
2. Lack of systematics (the ‘cycle’ isn’t repeated)
3. Lack of validity (researcher bias)
4. Lack of reliability (researcher methods)
5. The results are not generalisable



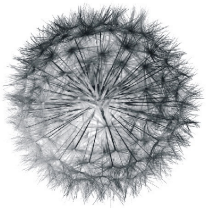
2. Lack of ‘systematics’

Gibson (1985) suggested that action research tended towards the heavily ironic situation of little self-critique.

“When I use the term 'action research', I am using it in a very broad sense as a systematic inquiry by practitioners about their own practices. There has been a lot of debate… about what is not real action research, about the specifics of the action research spiral, about whether action research must be collaborative or not, about whether it can or should involve outsiders as well as insiders, and so on...a lot of this discourse, although highly informative in an academic sense, is essentially irrelevant to many of those who actually engage in action research…

There are many different cultures of action research and it seems to me that an awful lot of time and energy is wasted in arguing over who are the 'real' action researchers and who are the imposters”

Zeichner (1993)

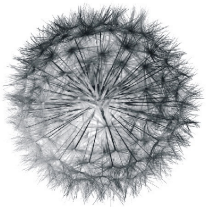


3. Lack of validity

Validity in quantitative approaches utilises sequentially:

- Appropriate instrumentation
- Careful sampling
- Appropriate statistical treatment of data
- Non-selective use of data
- triangulation
- Presentation of the data without misrepresentation

Cohen et al, 2007:133,146,148



4. Lack of reliability

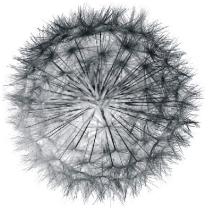
Quantitative research assumes the possibility of replication: if the same methods are used with the same sample, the results should be the same.

The premise of naturalistic studies include the uniqueness & idiosyncrasy of the situations – the study might not be replicated.

Qualitative researchers prefer to replace 'reliability' with the terms credibility, dependability, consistency, applicability, transferability.

We can however strive for replication in generating, refining, comparing and validating constructs, such as repeating the methods of data collection and analysis.

(see http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/9780415368780/B/Ch6.asp)



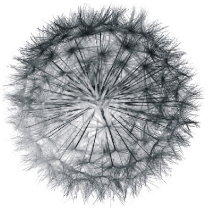
Data Collection I

Questionnaires

Structured, semi structured or unstructured?
Closed or open questions?
Rank ordering, Rating scales?
Sequencing the questions.
Piloting the questionnaire
Processing time and cost?

Interviews

Facts, opinions or attitudes?
Specificity or depth?
Structured, semi structured or unstructured?
Interviewer/interviewee bias
Interviewee reticence
Transcription time and cost



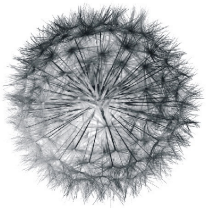
Data Collection II

Observations

Overt or covert observation?
Structured, semi structured or unstructured?
Observing facts, events or behaviours?
Risk of bias from selective attention, selective entry, selective memory, reactivity, number of observers, problems of inference, decisions on recording

Tests

What is being tested?
Are they parametric or non-parametric?
Are they norm- or criteria-referenced?
Are they commercial or 'home-made'?
Are they group or individual?
Are they self-reporting or administered?

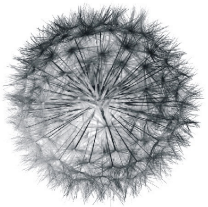


5. It doesn't generalise…

Small qualitative studies are not generalisable in the traditional sense, but this should not be used to decry their value to the education community, and to the reflective practice of the educator.

Generalising *within* specific groups, communities, situations, or *beyond* to outsider communities and situations?

Generalisable to theoretical propositions, not to populations (Yin, 2009)



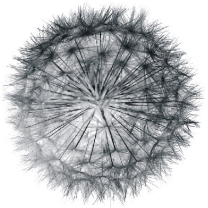
The role of the researcher

The primary role of the teacher-researcher is to teach.

Objectivity

Reflective practice

Share knowledge



Further reading

- “School-based research: A guide for education students” Elaine Wilson
- “A handbook for Teacher Research: From design to implementation” Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel
- EEF DIY evaluation guide http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/uploads/pdf/EEF_DIY_Evaluation_Guide_%282013%29.pdf
- Action Research in Education http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/actionresearch/arhome.htm
- Teacher Action Research gse.gmu.edu/research/tr

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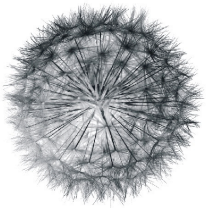

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