

Developing an Action Research Question

Richard Sagor (2000) suggests a good action research question meets three criteria:

- Your concern relates to teaching and learning in your classroom
- You are personally and emotionally concerned about this matter
- It is related to a teacher or student practice that can and should be improved

Start by examining concerns that you have about your instructional practice (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) or probe areas of internal/external tension (Hubbard and Power 1999). Determine which daily structures, functions or outcomes frustrate you. Do not ask questions for which you already know the answers (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Do not ask yes or no questions.

Next, identify the reason(s) for your frustration through self-questioning. For example, is there a particular practice/methodology that appears contrary to your personal philosophy? What might you be able to remedy or change about this concern? What resources are available? Do you need to revise, add to, or drop a specific instructional method? How do other professionals perceive your concern and what suggestions have they offered?

Another approach is to compare and/or contrast your professional goals as they relate to the daily application of your practice. What are your current goals and/or objectives for classroom instruction? Are your current goals different from the previous year? Are your goals related to student performance (knowledge, skills, behavior, or self beliefs/motivation), new instructional strategies, or school-wide programs? In the prior year, how close did you come to achieving those goals? What specifically would you do differently?

To narrow your question further, start looking at the pragmatic aspects of your research question. Identify the potential barriers and begin to plan for contingencies. Where might you find opposition to your project? What will you do if you do not receive the permissions needed (when they are needed)? How adaptable are you to changes? Action research requires some flexibility as you may not be able to obtain the data as expected due to events beyond your immediate control. As such, you may need to start a new data collection process, or revise your question. Moreover, the data may prove that you were asking the wrong question, signaling yet another revision of your inquiry.

Subsequently, you should determine the resources that you currently possess. What experiences or data do you have now? Indeed, you may have a relevant set of data that pre-exists your intended shift in practice. This preexisting data can be compared to the data collected after you have made the specified change(s). Furthermore, previously obtained data can be used as evidence which validates your reason(s) for the pedagogical adjustments, and also may demonstrate the improvement in your practices. While evaluating your data (both past and present), determine what data most clearly describes the differences between the before and after situations. Keep in mind that you are focusing on patterns and relationships throughout the process.

References

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