



SECTION TWO

ACTION RESEARCH PROCESSES

Aspects of participatory Action Research

A good way to understand participatory Action Research is to look at the concepts in its title.

It is action oriented

It is research

It involves those participating in the process

The 'action' aspect

Informed by understanding, the action provides change. Out of the attempt to produce change, a greater understanding emerges (Dick, 1999, p. 5).

Practitioners are confronted with a range of possibilities about how service delivery can be organised. Sometimes the way a service is delivered relates to the particular history of a sector or a particular community. Sometimes the approaches to service delivery reflect what skills and knowledge the practitioners have. And sometimes they reflect interpretations of what the funding agreement requires.

At its heart, Action Research is not simply about understanding something better. It is also about doing things differently.

The 'action' in Action Research means people should take the agreed action and observe carefully what happens. They should think about what happens during and after the action. 'Action' also means being responsive to issues that emerge along the way. It might be necessary to change the action because something occurs that was not expected. People should not get bogged down in talking and thinking. Instead, after careful reflection and planning, they should try out something and learn from it.

'We learnt that persistence pays off. If strategies trialed are not effective, do not give up, try different strategies' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Snapshot—characteristics of the ‘action’ in participatory Action Research

- it is deliberately undertaken;
- the nature of the action taken is recorded;
- the action is not slavishly pursued regardless of consequence;
- it is flexible and suits the local context; and
- the action is ethical.

The ‘research’ aspect



“...JUST CARRY ON AS USUAL DEAR, SHE’S OUR CASE WORKER...SHE’S MOVED IN FOR THE NEXT SIX WEEKS TO EXPERIENCE FIRST HAND ALL THE JOYS OF LIVING WITH YOU...”

‘Research’ simply means to find out. The word comes from the Old French for ‘to search closely’. This sums up what Action Research is all about.

Basically, the ‘research’ in Action Research answers questions and ensures that any actions or changes to services are based on well-founded evidence. It does not mean setting up experimental conditions with client control groups or studying samples of practitioners. It does not involve controlled conditions or generalised findings. That is what traditional scientific research does by isolating cause and effect.

Participatory Action Research is more than just ‘thinking about practice’: Action Research is a continuous process. In practice, it involves the ‘no-holds-barred’ reality of service delivery, people’s lives and the communities they live in.

Action Research interprets what is happening on the ground at different times. Any changes and modifications can be made as new insights and new questions arise. And stakeholders can share their experiences of what is happening, as it unfolds.



To some degree, though, Action Research does involve methodical processes and structures and commitments of time, attention and discipline.

To be credible, changes to service delivery practices must be based on solid evidence. With Action Research, the kinds of 'evidence' can vary quite widely and it does not just depend on numbers and statistics. Changes to service delivery can also depend on the experiences of people actually affected by early intervention.

Participatory Action Research is open-minded about what counts as evidence (or data)—it involves not only keeping records which describe what is happening as accurately as possible (given the particular questions being investigated and the real-life circumstances of collecting the data) but also collecting and analysing your own judgements, reactions and impressions about what is going on (McTaggart in Goff, 1998).

Snapshot—characteristics of the 'research' in participatory Action Research

- it involves asking and answering questions;
- it is systematic, as well as creative and respectful;
- it relies on keeping records in ways that everyone can understand;
- it values people's hunches and ideas, rather than just confirming what people think they already know;
- it is participatory because it brings together stakeholders' views, experiences and knowledge;
- it uses many sources of information to validate its findings; and
- it is transparent and open to challenge because it is made public.

The 'participatory' aspect

Action Research is about researching **alongside** participants rather than doing research **on** them (Quixley, 1997).

It brings diverse groups together, acknowledges views and experiences and incorporates these into the process of improving practice.

A stakeholder is anyone who is affected by the practices or situation that are part of the research. This can include workers, management, other agencies, and community members. Most importantly, it includes the young people, their families and the other people that are involved in early intervention practices.

At the moment, stakeholders are not treated as equals in research processes. For instance, clients are often not asked to play a part in helping to improve services and sometimes

it is wrongly assumed that these people are accustomed to dealing with formal processes and bureaucracies.

The degree of interest and capacity to contribute to Action Research will vary between individual stakeholders and good Action Research accommodates these differences.

Why stakeholders' participation is essential to Action Research

Clients, themselves are the ones who are going to be most affected by the changes and new strategies. Because they usually understand the issues and the history they can often suggest acceptable answers and ways to implement them.

In line with the 'two heads are better than one' saying, a diversity of stakeholders can often come up with a better solution together, than any one would have separately (Uhlman, 1995).

There is a long history of tokenist participation in service development because groups like marginalised young people, or their families, are assumed to be not interested or capable of participating in service development processes. However, Action Research creates meaningful opportunities for the widest range of stakeholders to participate in the inquiry process.

Participation is most effective when people feel they have contributed significantly and that they have real influence. It also helps people to learn to act for themselves or be part of a group.

Developing a sense of ownership among stakeholders is a very effective way to encourage people to invest their time and energy in working for change.

By including people in decisions about the programs and services that serve them, practitioners extend their knowledge base considerably and mobilise the resources of the community. Including more people in the process may seem to increase the possibilities for complexity and conflict, but it also enables practitioners to broaden their focus from one that seeks the immediate resolution of specific problems to more encompassing perspectives that have the potential to alleviate many inter-connected problems (Stringer, 1999, p. 37).

Importantly in Action Research, 'participation' is not slavishly pursued. Ethical and practical issues also need to be considered. *(For more information, see Section 3).*





Snapshot—characteristics of the ‘participation’ in participatory Action Research

- it is meaningful to participants and it is fundamental they have real, and not tokenistic involvement in the whole Action Research project;
- it is purposeful because it encourages participation to genuinely include participants’ experiences, views and ideas, even if they seem contradictory and reaching agreement on them is difficult;
- it supports diversity and seeks a broad range of views;
- it is developmental, which means that participation grows over time;
- it is creative because it suits local contexts and group needs by asking the right questions;
- it respects people’s comfort levels and boundaries, although it may take time to find the best ways to involve different stakeholders; and
- it is ongoing and built into the Action Research cycles at all stages and levels. It is not just a way of gathering ideas and providing feedback. Rather, it genuinely involves stakeholders in planning and implementing change.

Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect

Plan

Action Research planning involves deciding how to respond to a question, issue or ‘hunch’ and what to try out. Plans outline details of ‘doing’—that is, what, who, when, where, and how. It involves designing a framework to guide action. It may require a series of planning processes with different stakeholders.

Planning stages—Planning involves three main stages. These are clarifying the questions being asked, identifying the actions to be tried out, and developing an action plan.

Planning to get started—Getting the research process going may involve sitting down together and talking about local issues and the concerns that people have about areas of practice.

Example—getting people involved

We actually needed to plan how to get people involved, because people tended to do things in fairly fragmented ways in our area—the school did their thing with young people, Centrelink did their thing, we did ours.

So to get started we had to plan the strategies for getting into contact with others. This involved deciding which workers would approach which agencies; deciding how best to approach the different groups; having a time frame; and planning how we would document and keep track of the ‘action’ as we put our strategies into place.

We had a meeting and brain stormed ideas. Our plan was written up on the computer and everyone given a copy. When we put our plan into action, we learnt a lot from the strategies that didn’t work. This helped us develop the next plan (now with more input and information) for another round of action strategies (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Planning to take new action—Having gone through the whole Action Research cycle, people may already have enough information and understanding to plan a specific action, intervention or change.

Planning to go in a different direction—It may be, however that a new insight emerges mid-cycle and this leads to a new or different direction from the one originally planned. This could start another cycle that is based on new information which could also affect other Action Research under way.

Example—planning ways to understand

We tried to engage people (young people and parents) in focus groups about what they thought about homelessness, but found it didn’t work and not many people got involved. It emerged that the term ‘homelessness’ was culturally inappropriate and was scaring people off. So we then had to plan ways of understanding the meaning of homelessness in that particular cultural context, and how else it could be framed so we could better understand what was going on (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

How a plan might develop—Developing plans can mean bringing together stakeholders’ knowledge, concerns, thoughts and observations. The people involved might develop one or more strategies that respond to the question ‘*what is it we want to do and how we will do it?*’

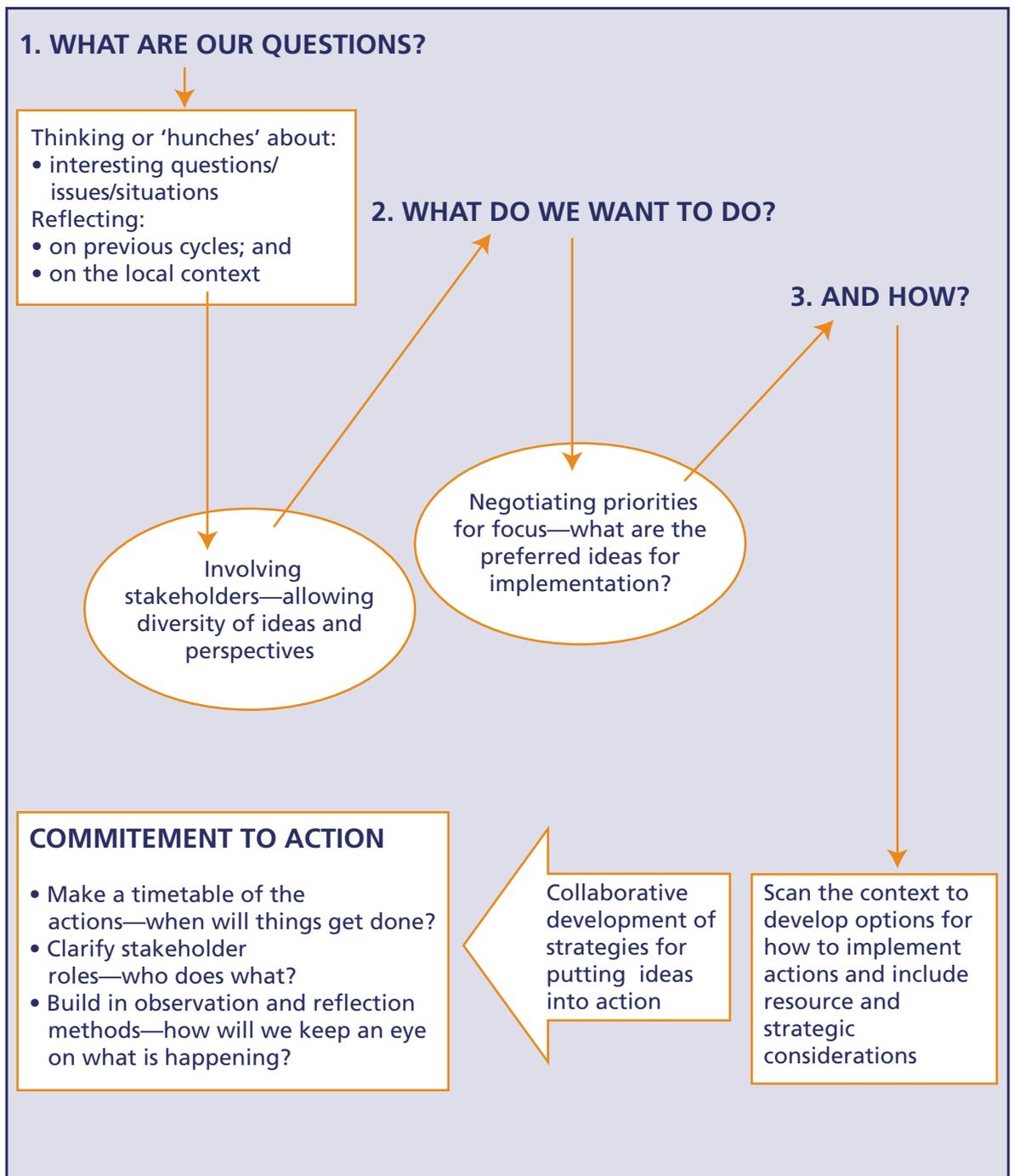
If necessary, the plan can be negotiated and modified. In the end, the idea is to get everyone to commit themselves to implementing an agreed plan together.





When we find the allies or stakeholders who share these concerns, we collectively plan ways of asking the right questions to find new ways of understanding and acting on the issue. Our allies may not think in the same way we do about the problem, but they share concern about its significance and they commit to changing their actions about it with us in some way (Goff et. al, 1998, p. 66).

What a plan might look like



Snapshot—refining the planning process

- planning often means clarifying and refining a plan as new and changed understandings emerge;
- it need not be difficult. Planning with stakeholders may already be part of what a service does;
- it involves clients. Existing ways of involving clients in services can be used or adapted;
- cycles can start with relatively small questions; and
- cycles are repeated and as the process becomes more familiar and comfortable, more people are likely to become involved.

Act

Action happens when the plan is put into place and the hoped for improvement to the social situation occurs. This action will be deliberate and strategic. It is here that participatory Action Research differs from other research methods in that the action or change is happening in reality and not as an experiment 'just to see if it works' (Seymour-Rolls & Hughes, 1995, p. 2).

Action stages—The first stage of 'action' is to systematically and creatively implement plans—that is doing what you said you were going to do. The second stage is communicating with others and involving them in the process. The third stage is keeping track of what happens. The final stage involves a possible 'with their feet' vote by stakeholders on any actions and changes.

Action to get started—Action Research cycles can start with a change, seeing what happens and following through with observation, reflection, and further planning. Sometimes starting Action Research is a good excuse to do something that has support but has not previously had the time and attention it needs.

Example—establishing a place to start

We had lots of comments from parents who said they didn't know where to turn and felt isolated. So we decided to establish a support group, and in the back of our mind we wanted also to develop some information-type groups around issues of parenting, conflict and stress. So this was a starting place to try something out (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Action usually comes after the development of a plan. The action might need to change and result in another action 'cycle' of its own.





Example—encouraging awareness and links

We wanted to increase awareness of our service with schools. However our strategies to establish links didn't seem to be working. So we changed tack and decided to approach specific people within the schools, in order to engage with these 'key staff' more intensely around issues of creating better linkages and awareness. This of course raised new questions to consider' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Snapshot—taking action

- actions reflect the plan, although the plan can be changed or abandoned;
- actions are deliberate because they are based on planning ;
- actions are not separate from research as the aim is to test questions in practice;
- documenting action as it happens makes describing what happened much easier;
- action does not have a particular end point. If it isn't working, it can be reviewed and re-planned at any time; and
- it does not have to be complex, technical or flashy. It may involve a small change at first like testing ideas and coming up with an initial strategy. People may have to try a number of things before they feel they are on to something, and they will learn something from everything that happens.

Observe

Good observation requires looking at what is happening and describing it accurately. Its purpose is to provide a sound base for reflection by producing a widely accepted understanding of what actually happened (Quixley, 1997).

It involves preserving observations in ways that allow them to be used later for reflection or as evidence. Observing well can be difficult, particularly if you tend to move straight into interpreting and making judgements, but observation is critical if we are able to say something is 'research' and not just our opinion.

Observation stages—The three stages of observation are to look at what is happening, describe what has happened and record what has happened.

Observing to start an Action Research process—An Action Research cycle can begin by taking a look at something that is happening or not happening; using available information; finding out new information; involving a range of people to describe what they think is occurring; and so on.

Example—observing the full picture

Observing what happened when we received referrals gave us insight into the necessity of speedy responses to young people. For example, Centrelink referred a young person to us, who had stated that she wanted to leave home. We decided the situation wasn't urgent, made an appointment for four days time and never saw the young person again. Observation is therefore an active process of describing what is happening—of getting a picture, so you can start to see what action might be needed (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Observing during 'action'—Observation and action can occur at the same time. Implementing an action plan and putting strategies in place also involve observing what is happening. If there are a number of participants, observations are likely to vary. These contribute to collecting what is called 'rich' or 'well-rounded' data.

Observing as an ongoing activity—Action Research involves ongoing observation—that is, making mental notes and recording observations. This recognises that the best ideas that help to answer questions often happen when they are least expected. It is important to bring multiple observations together, over time. This builds a coherent picture of what happened, or what is happening. This can mean combining various sorts of observation—including direct observations by workers, clients and other stakeholders, and information about services and from other sources.

Example—seeing what is going on

Getting a foot in the door at this particular [agency] was proving really difficult. I kept a journal of how things were going, and what I saw was going on. In the midst of it all, when I was really frustrated, I found the journal was a way of keeping track of the 'bigger picture' and I saw that actually, things were slowly—slowly—improving, even though at any given point in time it felt like things were 'stuck' (Youth Homelessness Pilot service).

Observation tools—There is a range of ways to observe what it is that is going on. This can involve existing 'proformas' (see Section 5), or you can be entirely innovative. The key is being clear about what sorts of observation tool best suits a particular Action Research question or project.

Examples of observation tools include

- questionnaires;
- minutes of forums and meetings;
- informal interviews and discussions and keeping a journal in the agency to track insights, observations, anecdotes and questions raised;





- group brainstorming;
- client information, referral sheets, work log books and other agency paperwork;
- e-mail and web sites where people can leave comments and ask questions;
- wall charts/graffiti boards; and
- information systems like computer files, coloured folders for different questions, suggestion boxes, and so on.

The levels of routine and detail in keeping track of observations will vary. Having some sort of system will definitely help, and can make it easier for new workers to adapt to Action Research processes.

In Action Research, different stakeholders are sure to observe and remember events differently. In participatory Action Research, this diversity contributes to a richer, more detailed perspective on what is happening.

Asking the right observation questions

Observing in Action Research involves asking some questions. These are:

'How will we find out what happens?'

'How can we get different perspectives on this?'

'Are our ways of observing and recording what happens capturing essential, exciting or unusual features?'

'How can we get the observations of the people most affected by the particular situation being looked at?'

Reflect

Reflection is about building a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened. Essentially it is a process of interpretation, in which a variety of information and perspectives is likely to produce different understandings. Reflection informs improvements to practice and affirms or challenges particular ways of doing things.

Observations and interpretations, are shared to establish the ways in which they do, or do not, ring true for everyone (Everitt et. al, 1992, p. 105).

Reflection stages—Reflection includes a number of stages such as standing back and looking at what happened (the observations). It also involves developing ideas or 'theories' about what happened and sharing these with others so that a range of interpretations and 'meanings' can be considered.

This building of shared meanings helps stakeholders to be actively involved in and develop 'ownership' of any changes. Another stage of reflection is people thinking about their own values and experiences and how these influence the importance they attach to various 'meanings'.

Snapshot—reflecting in different ways

- have a look at what has been done, and the information gathered about it, and let it sit for a while;
- talk to people;
- have some quiet time to work out what you think and encourage others to do the same;
- share ideas, and be honest about them;
- be open about what is going on;
- respect different understandings and cultures;
- be aware of people's values;
- think about things in their context; and
- give ideas/theories time to develop.

Asking the right reflection questions

Reflecting on Action Research involves asking some questions. These are:

'Why did this happen? Do we need to probe further to really understand it?'

'How do different groups understand what happened?'

'What assumptions are we working with? What ideas are being supported or challenged?'

'Who agrees or disagrees and what does this reveal?'

'Who got to have a say and who didn't—and what does that mean?'

'Have we developed a shared understanding of the meaning of what happened?'

'What implications do our findings have for further change or current practice?'





Reflection: An overview

1. WHAT HAPPENED?

Stakeholders should examine the collected data. They facilitate different perspectives and observations on what has happened.

2. WHY BRAINSTORM?

Brainstorming helps to gain different interpretations of why it happened.

Brainstorm by:

- talking it over;
- sharing insights; and
- piecing things together or 'jigsawing'.

3. NEGOTIATING MEANING

It is important in negotiating meaning to:

- understand that making theory = making informed guesses based on the information (evidence) available;
- compare and account for competing evidence/interpretations; and
- understand that alternative explanations may reveal an unexpected dimension which needs further exploration (this is a good thing).

THEN... people will have a clearer understanding of what happened and why it happened to inform where to go next and what this means for current and future practice.

BUT MAYBE... further clarification about different explanations and viewpoints and more data collection is needed.

SO THAT... short cycles can be used to confirm or otherwise the diverse ideas that emerge in relation to necessary change.

Participants can focus on the strategies and plans needed for implementing the change action.

