FIFTH EDITION

ACTION RESEARCH

ERNEST T. STRINGER • ALFREDO ORTIZ ARAGÓN

Action Research

Fifth Edition

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Preface

Making a Difference: Research in the 21st Century

Introduction

Welcome to the fifth edition of this text! Our sincere hope is that you find within these pages the ideas and practices that will enhance your professional life and enable you to more effectively serve the people with whom you work. We come to the task conscious that we live in an era that, while challenging, provides the potential to engage a changing world that seeks the reassurance of processes that provide more equitable and effective professional practices.

In this text we seek to engage the dynamics that define the 21st century, where alienation between people is becoming increasingly evident, where inequity between the rich and the poor continues to expand, and where grave social issues are ignored in the interest of wealthy and powerful groups and individuals. In this edition we therefore present professional practitioners and community members in all spheres of life with a set of practices and processes that engage truly human and ethical procedures that instill life and energy into their work. We believe the following features of this text provide the means to accomplish these worthy aims:

- Research that engages diverse groups of people in collaborative processes that produce practical, effective, and sustainable outcomes to real-world problems they experience in their work, community, organizational, or institutional lives
- Practice frameworks that clarify the step-by-step procedures presented in the text
- Contemporary theory that builds on past knowledge to assist readers to understand the complex dynamics now evident in social life at all levels—organizational, local, state, national, and international
- An integration of research processes with social and digital media that have become a central feature of modern life
- A clear description of the developmental processes needed to accomplish social change

Enriching Professional Practice

This edition builds on the now extended experience of its authors by presenting an approach to action research that clearly acknowledges the dramatic changes now taking place in our everyday lives. Developments in information technology and social media fuel radical developments in our homes, workplaces, and communities. Rapid change in almost all sectors of our social lives require constant adaptation to the operational requirements now instilled in our agencies, institutions, and commercial operations that accompany economic and political developments in both government and industry at local, state, and national levels. Grave issues such as climate change, ongoing military conflicts, and the consequent displacement and mass movements of populations threaten to unhinge the very institutions created to provide order and coherence to social life on this planet Earth.

In these circumstances we speak to the many practitioners who, in all corners of life, continue to provide programs and services in education, health, justice, welfare, and a wide range of other human services. Often hampered by overly restrictive organizational mandates or poorly resourced programs, they consciously work to overcome the sometimes difficult circumstances they confront to provide for the well-being of the people they serve. The first sections of the text present researching practitioners with well-tested, practical processes that provide a tool kit of skills that enhance their professional capacities as well as a body of theory that enables them to understand more clearly the complex dynamics of the social and organizational environments in which they work.

The practices and processes we present in these pages therefore seek to provide moral and ethical approaches to professional life that have real impact on people's lives. We present an approach to research that not only seeks to extend people's understanding of the issues and problems that they confront in their daily lives but also resolve those issues by taking practical steps to deal with them effectively.

While our own experience has been significantly enriched by the rich body of theoretical work embodied in much of the literature, we believe that the ultimate end of this process must be the active engagement of theory and practice. Theory, for us, is not a process of abstract and disengaged intellectual activity, though at times that has a purpose, but a process of discovery that engages people in communities, agencies, social groups, organizations, and institutions in collaborative processes that assist them to resolve the complex issues they sometimes face. As becomes evident in this text, a primary purpose of action research is not just to gain knowledge but to put the knowledge emerging from research to practical use.

In an age where the publish-or-perish dynamics of university life tend to lock people ever more firmly into the ivory tower, our experience suggests academic life can become more purposefully fulfilling by engaging the social realities of the

people we serve. Publication by itself, we suggest, has become increasingly irrelevant in an age of "fake news," and there is an urgent need for the resources of the university to become more directly relevant to the crucial issues now emerging in all spheres of social life. Recent political events have made it clear that unethical and self-interested elites are able to harness the angst of the disenfranchised using ignorance and violence to serve their own political ends. Research, we believe, can no longer be considered the purview of an intellectual elite but should be embedded in the everyday lives of ordinary people to counter these reprehensible purposes.

In Search of Meaningful Methodology

The practices presented herein emerged from extensive experience in the field, each of us engaging in research activities in a wide variety of contexts for extended periods. Ernie's experience initially focused on his search for more effective approaches to education for Australia's Indigenous people. As he has indicated elsewhere (Stringer, 2015), after he had experienced years of fruitless search for ways for Aboriginal people to gain entry to Australia's universities, he became involved in a community-led action by Aboriginal people:

> The situation eventually resolved itself when I was asked by two Aboriginal men to help them set up a Centre for Aboriginal Studies at the university at which I worked. Almost no Aboriginal people, at that stage, were employed in any academic capacity in any university in my state and Aboriginal people rarely entered a university program. In the following years, working within a set of principles eventually defined as "Aboriginal Terms of Reference" and learning practices defined within what was then known as community development, I worked under the leadership of Aboriginal people to institute university programs and services specifically designed for the personal, social, cultural, and educational needs of the people.
>
> In that wonderfully rich and collaborative environment, I experienced the joy and satisfaction of assisting Aboriginal people to achieve wonderfully effective results that transformed their place in the academic life of the nation. Aboriginal faculty worked in partnership with non-Aboriginal faculty to present unique and demanding programs derived from extensive consultation with Aboriginal communities. In following years, the number of Aboriginal graduates soared exponentially and the number employed in senior agency and organizational positions likewise increased dramatically.
>
> The processes, practices, and theory developed in this context extended the depth and extent of my own capacities, eventually becoming encapsulated in the family of methods known initially as "community-based research" and became the basis for the action research that I have now practiced and taught in a variety of contexts for many years. The principles and practices that worked so well

with Aboriginal people, I discovered, were at least as effective in other contexts, including developmental work in East Timor, middle-class schools in Australia, a variety of health and welfare projects in other states of Australia, and community projects in Texas, New Mexico, Oregon, and New York in the United States.

Although I have occasionally been prevented from achieving my goals by the obstinacy of rigidly fixed bureaucratic procedures, the overall view as I look back is one of great satisfaction. Many of the friendships I have developed help sustain me, but fundamentally I receive regular feedback that gives me a sense that I have made a significant difference to the lives of the people I have served. It is a feeling that reflects the words of my Aboriginal friend Darryl Kickett: "I take my hat off to them! THEY'RE the ones who did it. THEY did it. No one else did it for them. To see them graduate and go out into the world and conquer the environment around them—in a good way—is so important." Action research, for me, makes all things possible.

Although Alfredo's pathway has been somewhat different, his experiences in the field employed for 9 years in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Latin America eventually led him to question the effect of the organizational capacity-building services for which he was responsible:

Over time I became a frustrated capacity-building facilitator, believing that I was engaging in change processes that were only scratching the surface. This frustration was a major motivator behind my decision to pursue a PhD in search of a more meaningful and impactful capacity-building methodology, which led me to action research.

I first learned of action research during my PhD process at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), in large part because many members of the Participation, Power and Social Change research team to which I was assigned were action research (AR) proponents. As I became more familiar with AR concepts early in my research design, it became clear to me that AR was my only pathway to get a PhD, primarily because I had not really done formal research before as a practitioner. I had a lot of work experience and had produced a lot of written materials along the way, but my main strength was not going to be in learning formal "scientific" research methods and putting them to use for the first time as a PhD researcher. Partly out of intimidation of who I wasn't (scientific researcher), and partly in vindication of who I was (experienced capacity-building practitioner), I decided that my research process had to build strongly on the things I knew how to do well—namely design and facilitate capacity-building change processes but now using action research! My research ended up doing just that, although in a much more critical, reflective, and participatory way than I had done before.

Action research principles and practices have helped me to approach shared capacity-building spaces such as workshops more slowly and emergently, engaging in more open questioning, reflection, active listening, and systematic documentation of the active stories in the room, which are found in the

conversations, patterns of behavior, energy, and power relationships that emerge in real-life interactive drama of which I am a part. Action research has made me more aware of who participates, whose knowledge counts, and who calls the shots or decides what to do in different moments of the process. I am more aware of the deep connections between culture, identity, and methodology. And I am cognizant of the power of knowledge as an input into purposeful action and action as a powerful source of knowledge. Through this book I am excited to share more about how all practitioners can become action researchers and leverage action and knowledge in new and transformative ways.

Building from a "politics of hope," we therefore present practical procedures that more clearly illuminate the dynamics embedded in social settings but, in addition, define clear steps to take action to ameliorate the impact of many of the more onerous issues emerging from the impact of the ineffective and sometimes obfuscating narratives now embedded in the public arena. We trust that in working through the procedures suggested, you experience the joy and fulfillment that comes with work that is truly satisfying and effective, providing tangible ways in which you improve the well-being of the people you serve.

The Structure of the Text

Although this edition provides the basic materials including the original text, we have altered the layout of contents somewhat. The text is organized in three main sections, each of which provides explanatory notes related to the issues included:

Section I: An Introduction to Action Research provides a general orientation to the first two chapters.

Chapter 1: Understanding Action Research introduces readers to action research, including the principles that provide the foundation for our particular orientation to the field and examples drawn from the wide range of contexts where it has been applied. In the process it introduces the Look–Think–Act framework that guides data gathering, analysis, and action.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations of Action Research explores the philosophical and theoretical foundations of action research to assist readers to understand how the application of practically grounded research procedures distinguishes it from other approaches to investigation.

Section II: Action Research Practices and Processes provides an overview of Chapters 3 through 6, which provide detailed procedures and practices for engaging real-world environments in ways that make a difference in people's lives.

Chapter 3: Initiating an Action Research Process presents detailed procedures for initiating a research project.

Chapter 4: Look: Generating and Gathering Data guides readers through a set of practices for generating and gathering data.

Chapter 5: Think: Reflecting and Analyzing focuses on data analysis that enables research participants to develop an extended understanding of the issues and dynamics effecting the issues under investigation.

Chapter 6: Act: Implementing Practical Solutions suggests how knowledge emerging from the process of investigation provides the basis for taking practical and effective action to resolve the issues and problems that were the focus of investigation.

Section III: From Local to Global—Action Research for Social Change is intended to enrich and extend the capacities of experienced researchers. It first provides an extended discussion of the complex issues now facing the global community, recognizing the need to reframe the work of the university to counter the impact of the disturbing ideologies increasingly evident in many parts of the world. It introduces strategic developmental processes through which action research might provide a "politics of hope" that counters the impact of socially divisive knowledge production.

Chapter 7: Reporting: Informing Stakeholders and Other Audiences describes formal and informal procedures using traditional reporting processes and creative multimedia presentations for disseminating research information, not just to academic and professional communities but to the populace at large. Research information, we suggest, can no longer be considered only the purview of elite audiences.

Chapter 8: Developmental Approaches to Social and Organizational Change presents strategic developmental processes, moving from personal reflection through micro and mezza levels of practice at the small-group level to macro processes of organizational change that are the basis for meta-level institutional change.

Chapter 9: Action Research and Digital Media brings action research into the 21st century. With digital media so rapidly becoming a dominant force in public and private life, we provide detailed descriptions of practical ways these technologies can be used to enhance the power and reach of action research.

Enriching the Learning Process

Reflection and Learning activities presented at the end of each chapter are intended to capture the spirit of action research. They seek to assist people to learn from experience by reflecting on their use of the procedures we present in real-life situations. In doing so we hope to extend the power and application of abstract ideologies and theories, illuminating the way they apply to the realities of people's own experience. In this respect they may be interpreted as processes of action learning—learning not just from the literature or lectures of "authorities" but from reflection on their engaged experiences.

Each chapter finishes with a Chapter Review that summarizes the key issues presented to assist readers to understand and actively engage the simple procedures of action research in the grassroots work of their everyday professional and community lives.

This edition takes a giant leap into the 21st century by acknowledging the changing world in which we now live, where information technology and social media have transformed our lives, providing multiple ways of communicating and opening us to an incredible array of resources. In this edition we now complement the array of information included in this text with a range of interesting and useful internet sources and other materials provided on a website directly associated with our book. Please visit **https://www.actionresearch5.com/**

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After an early career as a primary teacher and school principal, Ernie was a lecturer in education at Curtin University of Technology, in Western Australia. From the mid-1980s, based at Curtin's Centre for Aboriginal Studies, he worked collaboratively with Aboriginal staff and community people to develop a wide variety of innovative and highly successful education and community development programs and services. His work with government departments, community-based agencies, business corporations, and local governments assisted them to work more effectively with Aboriginal people. In recent years, as visiting professor at the University of New Mexico and Texas A&M University and as visiting scholar at Cornell University, he taught research methods courses and/or engaged in projects with African American and Hispanic community and neighborhood groups. As a UNICEF consultant, he recently engaged in a major project to increase parent participation in schools in East Timor. He is author of *Action Research* (Sage, 2007), *Action Research in Education* (Pearson, 2008), *Action Research in Health* (with Bill Genat; Pearson, 2004), and *Action Research in Human Services* (with Rosalie Dwyer; Pearson, 2005). Until recently, he was a member of the editorial board of the *Action Research Journal* and past president of the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA).

Alfredo Ortiz Aragón
Alfredo is an action researcher who designs and implements change processes to address pressing social and environmental concerns in support of equitable development. In the field he seeks to help organizations and movements that support processes of social change and environmental stewardship in order to be more effective and reflective in their work. In all of his work he uses methods that appeal to diverse learning styles but that also challenge dominant ways of seeing, knowing, and acting in the world that uphold unjust social rules and structures. He encourages all of his collaborators to reflectively "put themselves into the picture" and consciously participate in the changes they seek for others. He is willing to lead but also be vulnerable and open about what he and we know, and how we all might use our leadership and vulnerability to engage in honest conversations that help us support people in need in ways that are culturally relevant and potentially transformative. He is an associate professor at the Dreeben School of Education Graduate Studies Program at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, where he teaches qualitative and action research methods and design. His PhD is from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, in the United Kingdom.

In Memoriam: Egon Guba

For Ernie, Egon's gentle friendship, insistent mentoring, and keen intellect provided the impetus to write this, his first book. Now in its fifth edition, it is a tribute to the man who helped him frame and shape his rough ideas into a form that has now provided a significant resource for scholars, students, and practitioners for many years. Egon's contribution to the world of research and evaluation will last through the ages as people construct and support their research on the foundation he and his wife, Yvonna Lincoln, laid down for many decades. Thank you, Egon Guba, for the wonderful gift you gave us all.

Section

I

An Introduction to Action Research

This section introduces action research as an action-oriented, systematic approach to investigation and reflective practice that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike experimental and quantitative approaches to research that seek only to provide generalizable explanations about the nature of problems, action research seeks to directly engage the complex dynamics of specific social contexts to discover practical solutions to problems people experience in family, community, organizational, and institutional settings.

Common approaches to academic research focus on experimental and quasi-experimental processes in which researchers deliberately exclude themselves from active participation in the research setting. Action researchers, however, take quite a different stance, which highlights their desire to work collaboratively with participants to achieve practical solutions to issues and problems they experience in their everyday lives. In this light, action researchers might be heard offering advice such as *"Don't limit yourself to passive approaches to research. Take action—you can learn much more if you get engaged!"*

This approach to investigation is particularly relevant to practitioners—people in fields such as nursing, teaching, engineering, law enforcement, social work, and so on. Practitioners are task-oriented people whose main job is to do things—to get things done for or with specific groups of people. They are usually prepared with relevant knowledge in their field through formal or informal training and apply practices and procedures related to their respective professions. Unlike academic researchers, however, their main job is not to generate knowledge, to develop theory, or to publish the results of their research but to engage in forms of inquiry that enable them to improve their practice or resolve the complex issues they sometimes face.

Traditionally, academic research commences with a review of the literature that enables researchers to learn what is known about the issue to be investigated.

This often provides significant and useful information for readers to understand much about the issue and the factors affecting it. Much of the research literature, however, speaks in terms of abstract language that presents only a limited picture of the rich and sometimes puzzling complexity of social life and fails to provide the types of insight that enable a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of events that comprise people's lives. Research participants, we propose, gain greater understanding by actively engaging in actions that reveal the complex network of issues and events embedded in the contexts they study. By acknowledging and understanding these issues, research participants greatly increase the potential of their research to resolve the problems at the heart of their investigations. We therefore suggest that the highest forms of knowledge are those that provide the basis for practical action. The chapters in this section offer concrete steps for engaging in this type of research.

Chapter 1: Understanding Action Research describes continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action that enable research participants to construct practical solutions to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localized settings. Action research may be applied in schools, businesses, health and human services agencies, community organizations, and many other settings, enabling research participants to extend their understanding of issues and events and increase their capacity to deal effectively with the problematic issues at the heart of their research. Research is envisaged as a collaborative process in which the professional researcher's knowledge is combined with the knowledge and experience of local people to engage in inquiries with the intent of finding practical and effective solutions to their issues.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations of Action Research presents action research as a legitimate and professionally acceptable approach to investigation by exploring its philosophical and theoretical groundings. As the chapter indicates, traditional approaches to investigation, usually seen as the purview of professionally and academically trained experts, often provide but a limited understanding of the complex dynamics at work in any social setting. Collaborative processes, the chapter suggests, provide the means to engage the deeper understandings embedded in the experience and knowledge of people who inhabit the settings investigated. Chapter 2 also reveals the extent to which action research processes are particularly relevant in contexts where professional practitioners are asked to work with diverse cultural groups that are often part of the setting. Finally, the chapter describes how action research is appropriate to the diverse cultural settings of modern society and especially relevant to contexts involving racial, Indigenous, migrant, and other marginalized or alienated groups.

Reflection and Action

At the end of each chapter you will find a Reflection and Action section that provides opportunities for reflecting on the issues presented and engaging in activities that can help you make sense of and better understand the content of the chapter. The activities are based on the assumption that we learn better by doing rather than just reading, thinking, talking, or listening. Individual readers may relate the issues covered in the chapter to their own experience to ensure that they understand the concepts, procedures, and techniques described. This process of clarifying and understanding will be enhanced, however, if you engage in conversations around these issues with friends, colleagues, or classmates.

The activities we have included also provide opportunities for you to practice some of the techniques and procedures presented. Practice the activities suggested, reflect on what you have done, and have others observe you, if possible. The process of reflecting and obtaining feedback on your actions will be informative. The activities themselves are best applied to a real-life situation to which you have access. It can be your own workplace or a community context where you can spend time over a period of weeks. You will be asked to explore a simple issue or problem that you or others are experiencing in this place. If you cannot find such a place, then perform the learning activities as best you can, possibly in your own home or with friends and neighbors. The learning activities can also be enacted in a "strange" place—a place with which you are not terribly familiar but to which you have access. In these circumstances you may be less comfortable, but you will probably learn more about a process of investigation.

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Action Research

What Is Action Research?[1]

Unlike experimental research that looks for generalizable explanations related to a small number of variables, action research seeks to directly engage the complex dynamics of given social contexts in order to accomplish practical solutions to issues affecting people's lives. Action research involves the use of analytic frameworks and reflective processes to investigate real-life issues that have an impact on people's lives and threaten their well-being. It is an approach to investigation that uses continuing cycles of observation, reflection, and action to reveal effective solutions to issues and problems experienced by people in their everyday lives or in times of crisis. In the process, action research provides the means by which people in schools, businesses, government, health and human services agencies, and community organizations may increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work and community activities. Action research also seeks to build a body of knowledge that enhances professional and community practices and increases the well-being of the people involved.

As described in the opening sections of this book, the authors have engaged in exciting and fulfilling research projects that have made a significant difference to the lives of the people with whom they worked. While many smaller projects have had impressive outcomes, some have resulted in wide-ranging and long-term developments that became national in scope. The application of the principles and practices we describe below has not only provided participants with immediate results from the action they have taken but also provided them with the capacity to continue to enhance and improve their occupational, organizational, and community lives. Years later, we still meet people who speak proudly of the accomplishments emerging from their action research. Frequently, they say that "it was life-changing," "it empowered me personally," "it changed my world view," "it inspired me to work for social justice for my people," or express themselves in many similar ways. One woman said of her participation in a program emerging from and sustained by action research processes: "it was

[1] A box at the end of each chapter provides a summary of the material presented therein.

groundbreaking work; the best of all the work I've done in my life! It was incredibly stimulating. It was a really exciting time. It was amazing. The bigger issue of social justice seemed to be what anchored everybody.. . . You were actually doing stuff that was about practical engagement that was delivering stuff back to the communities."

The passion and commitment evident in these comments provided the energy and enthusiasm to continue to work through sometimes difficult issues and to develop the meaningful relationships that are the basis for truly effective work. Action research therefore is often professionally fulfilling at a deeply personal level, especially for those who seek to challenge continuing issues that threaten the well-being of people in current times. It is, we suggest, an essential approach to research in the current era, providing the means to conduct professional life in ways that serve the causes of liberation and social justice.

Professional and service occupations—teaching, social work, health care, psychology, youth work, and so on—thus have the potential to provide meaningful and fulfilling work that is intrinsically rewarding. Increasingly, however, people in these sectors find their work to be more demanding and less satisfying as they struggle to balance growing demands on their energies from increasing workloads and time-consuming requirements of increased reporting. These pressures are exacerbated by tensions inherent in contemporary society, the complexity of people's everyday social lives providing a fertile seedbed for a proliferating host of family, community, and institutional problems. Professional practitioners and agency workers are increasingly held accountable for solutions to issues that have their roots in the deeply complex interaction between the mandates of central authorities and the realities of people's everyday social and professional lives: stress, unemployment, family breakdown, alienation, behavioral problems, violence, poverty, discrimination, conflict, and so forth. In the current context, for example, teachers are often held accountable for the poor performance of their students, politicians and education authorities blaming teacher practices for low test scores, when academic performance is far more affected by factors outside of the classroom and school.

Although adequately prepared to deal with the technical requirements of their daily work, practitioners often face recurrent crises outside the scope of their professional expertise. Teachers face children disturbed by conflict in their homes and communities, youth workers encounter resentful and alienated teenagers, health workers confront people apparently unconcerned about life-threatening lifestyles and social habits, and social and welfare workers are strained past their capacity to deal with the impossible caseloads spawned by increasing poverty and alienation. In the business world, the sometimes overwhelming corporate demands to reduce costs and increase profit limit the possibilities for workers to provide more effective service or durable goods.

Typical responses to these and other crises invariably involve the use of a teacher, social worker, youth worker, counselor, or similar service professional whose task it is to address the problem by applying some intervention at an individual or programmatic level. In many situations, however, these types of response have failed to diminish growing social problems that have multiplied faster than human and financial resources available to deal with them. Moreover, evidence suggests that centralized policies and programs generated by "experts" have limited success in resolving these problems. In education, for instance, billions of dollars invested over four decades in special programs and services has failed to close the gap in educational performance between mainstream and marginalized social groups (Cole, 2010; Sarason, 1990). More broadly, in recent decades wages for workers have stagnated, while the wealth of those in higher managerial classes has increased significantly (Piketty, 2014). Further, despite clear evidence of the catastrophic outcomes of human-induced climate change, governments have been largely unwilling or politically unable to take the strong steps necessary to diminish the continued reliance on heat-inducing fossil fuels (Apgar et al., 2019; Bradbury et al., 2019).

To effectively address these proliferating social problems, centralized policies and expert models need to be complemented by creative action of those closest to their sources—working people, service professionals, agency workers, students, clients, communities, and families who face the issues on a daily basis. The daily work of these "practitioners" provides many opportunities for them to acquire valuable insights into the social worlds in which they live and work by providing them with the means to formulate effective solutions to problems that permeate their lives.

Action research works on the assumption that those closest to the impact of the above issues are "experts" in understanding many of the realities of their own lives and should therefore be directly involved in addressing them. Where centralized policies, programs, and services consistently fail to provide answers to social problems, we suggest, service practitioners should engage the human potential of all people who contribute to the complex dynamics of the contexts in which these occur. Centralized programs that dictate specific actions, procedures, and interventions should be replaced by flexible responses and actions that are appropriate to particular places and social groups.

Action research processes suggest the need for people to change their vision of professional practitioners from directive technicians to creative inquirers. This new vision rejects the unthinking application of predetermined procedures across all settings and contexts and instead advocates the use of contextually relevant processes to modify and adapt practices according to the realities of the particular contexts in which they work. The pages that follow describe some of the ways in which professional and technical workers in agency, organization, and community

contexts can hone their investigative skills, engage in systematic approaches to inquiry, and formulate effective and sustainable solutions to deep-rooted problems that diminish the quality of their work. This volume presents an approach to inquiry that seeks not only to enrich professional, community, and business practices, but also to enhance the understanding of all people affected by the issues investigated.

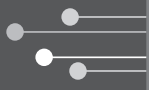
As becomes evident in the following sections, action research is not merely a tool for applying standardized procedures to professional, organizational, or community settings, nor an occupation intended as the sole provenance of trained researchers. Neither is action research a superficial set of routines or fixed prescriptions that legitimate professional practices, but an approach to inquiry and investigating that provides a flexible set of procedures that are systematic, cyclical, solutions-oriented, and participatory, providing the means to devise sustainable improvements in practice that enhance the lives and well-being of all participants.

Action Research: Systematic and Adaptive Processes of Participative Inquiry

A primary purpose of action research is to provide people with the capacity to engage in a systematic inquiry and investigation to discover effective ways of resolving problems and issues experienced in their work or community lives. As becomes evident, however, practitioners are most effective when they do not work in isolation but engage in participative and collaborative relationships with people previously designated as subjects, clients, customers, or students. Action research works best, we assert, when all people affecting or affected by issue(s) of concern are included in the processes of inquiry. Practitioners, as research facilitators, assist those affected by the issue—stakeholders—in systematic explorations that, in very direct ways, enable them to resolve complex issues in their individual, group, community, or organizational lives.

Action research therefore is a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to generate the knowledge needed to resolve specific problems. It is not a panacea for all ills and does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to more clearly understand their situations and to formulate effective solutions to problems they face. A basic action research routine provides a simple yet powerful framework—Look–Think–Act (see Box 1.1 on p. 9)—that enables people to commence their inquiries in a straightforward manner and build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases. The terms in parentheses in Box 1.1 illustrate how the phases of the routine relate to traditional research practices.

Reflection 1.1: Ernie—Learning From Experience



As a young teacher, I had the rare experience of being transferred from the relative security of a suburban classroom to a primary school in a remote desert region of Western Australia. My task was to provide education for the children of the Aboriginal people who, at this time, still lived as they had for millennia, moving through the land in small family groups, hunting for their food, and sleeping in leaf shelters. On my first day in class, I was confronted by a wall of silence that effectively prevented any possibility of teaching. The children refused to respond verbally to any of my queries or comments, hanging their heads, averting their eyes, and sometimes responding so softly that I was unable to hear what they said. In these discomfiting circumstances, I was unable to work through any of the customary routines and activities that had constituted my professional repertoire in the city. Lessons were abbreviated, disjointed, and seemingly pointless, and my professional pride took a distinct jolt as an ineffective reading lesson followed an inarticulate math period, preceding the monotony of my singular voice through social studies.

The silence of the children in the classroom was in marked contrast to their happy chatter as we walked through the surrounding bush that afternoon, my failing spirits leading me to present an impromptu natural science "lesson." In this and following lessons, the children taught me a great deal about the living bushland that was their natural home—the small animals and birds that, though unseen by my city-bred eyes, were everywhere; the plants, fruits, roots, and berries that were edible; the places where water could be found (a precious commodity in this desert environment); and how to survive when the weather was very hot. My "teachers" were a mine of information, and they reveled in the opportunities to demonstrate to me their knowledge about the environment and their skill in being able to move so easily in what I saw as a hostile setting. I discovered that I was able to make use of this knowledge and interest in the classroom, fashioning a range of learning activities related to literacy, mathematics, social science, and natural science.

In small ways I was thus able to accommodate my approach to teaching in this unique educational environment, but the experience endowed me with an understanding that the regular routines of teaching were unsuited to my current circumstances. All the taken-for-granted assumptions of my professional life rang hollow as I struggled to understand the nature of the problems that confronted me and to formulate appropriate educational experiences for this vibrant, independent, and sometimes fractious group of students. Texts, curricula, teaching materials, learning activities, classroom organization, speech, interactional styles, and all other facets of classroom life became subjects of inquiry and investigation as I sought to resolve the constant stream of issues and problems that emerged in this environment. To be an effective teacher, I discovered that it was necessary to modify and adapt my regular professional routines and practices to fit the lives of the children.

The legacy of that experience has remained with me. Although I have long since left school classrooms behind, the lessons I learned there still pervade all

Continued

Reflection 1.1: Ernie—Learning From Experience (Continued)

my work. I engage all professional, organizational, and community contexts with a deep sense of my need to explore and understand the situation. An attitude of inquiry enables me to engage, examine, explore, formulate answers, and devise responses to deal more effectively with each context I engage—and the diverse experiences and perspectives of the people within it.

In these situations, I now cast myself as a research facilitator, working with and supporting people to engage in a systematic investigation that leads to clarity and understanding for us all and to provide a basis for effective action. In many places in the United States, Canada, Australia, East Timor, and Singapore, I use techniques and procedures that have been fruitfully applied to the day-to-day work of people in agencies, organizations, and community settings. I am now a practitioner–researcher.

The Look–Think–Act routine is but one of a number of ways in which action research is envisaged. For example, Hendricks (2016) presents as similar model to our own based on continuing movements through a reflect, act, evaluate routine. Kemmis and McTaggart (2014) present action research as a spiral of activity: plan, act, observe, reflect. Calhoun (1993), in a similar vein, suggests cycles based on steps commencing with selection of area of study, followed by collection of data, organization of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and finally "taking action." Models by Wells (1994), Coghlan (2019), and Mills (2017) provide similar

Box 1.1 A Basic Action Research Routine in Relation to a Specified Issue or Problem

Look

- Observe what is going on (Observe).
- Gather relevant information (Gather data).
- Describe the situation (Define and describe).

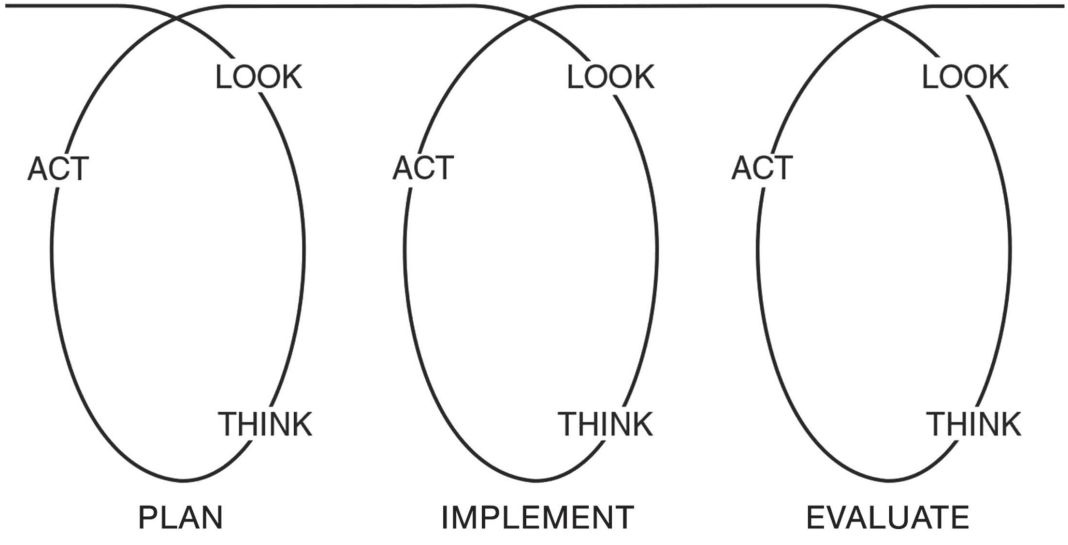
Think

- Explore and analyze: What is happening here? (Analyze).
- Interpret and explain: How or why are things as they are? (Theorize).

Act

- Define a course of action based on analysis and interpretation (Plan).
- Implement the plan (Implement).
- Assess the effectiveness of actions taken (Evaluate).

Figure 1.1 Action Research Interacting Spiral



processes that include observation, interpretation, planning, and action, each having feedback loops at each step.

Different formulations of action research reflect the diverse ways in which the same set of activities may be described, although the processes they delineate are similar. There are, after all, many ways of cutting a cake. What is important to note for practitioners is that you are already "acting" in your day-to-day work. All models of action research provide some form of "looking" and "thinking," suggesting the need for practitioners and other participants to more consciously question what is often taken for granted—the "normal" way things "are supposed" to happen. Throughout this book we will focus particularly on how practitioners can more consciously add more "looking" and "thinking" to their "acting" to become more effective practitioner-researchers.

Although the Look–Think–Act routine is presented in a linear format in sections of this book, it should be considered as a continually recycling set of activities. As participants work through each of the major stages, they explore the details of their activities through a constant process of observation, reflection, and action. At the completion of each set of activities, they review (look again), reflect (reanalyze), and re-act (modify their actions). These cycles can sometimes be framed as phases of a research process so that planning, implementing, and evaluating, for instance, can be seen as cycles of a project (see Figure 1.1). As experience shows, action research is not a neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step by step to the end of the process. People will find

Reflection 1.2: Ernie—Outcomes of Action Research

A colleague approached me after listening to my report on one of the action research projects in which I had been involved. "You know," she said, "the difference with your work is that you expect something to actually happen as a result of your research activities." Her experience of research, common to much university research, is that a project is complete when the report has been written, with no other actions contemplated other than a publication in a research journal. Action research projects, however, engage participants in ongoing actions to resolve the problem or issue that was the focus of the research.

themselves working backward through the routines, repeating processes, revising procedures, rethinking interpretations, leapfrogging steps or stages, and sometimes making radical changes in direction. Because new actions are based on learning that occurs at each step of the way, action research often is not a linear process (Burns, Harvey, & Ortiz Aragón, 2012; Ortiz Aragón, 2012; Pettit, 2012; Scharmer, Pomeroy, & Käufer, 2021). The steps and cycles of an action research process, however, provide a compass or map that assists participants to track their progress, wherever and however they proceed.

Action research, however, is not merely a technical routine. As will become evident, the procedures presented are designed to take into account the social, cultural, interactional, and emotional factors that affect all human activity. "The medium is the message!" As will become evident throughout the book, the implicit values and underlying assumptions embedded in action research use a set of guiding principles that can facilitate a democratic, liberating, and life-enhancing approach to research.

Making a Difference: Practical, Solutions-Oriented Inquiry

Ernie's colleague's statement in Reflection 1.2 characterizes, for us, one of the significant differences between action research and traditional research. Traditionally, research projects are complete when a report has been written and recommendations presented to the contracting agency or published in an academic journal. An action research project can also have these organizational or academic outputs that provide the basis for developing rich theory and informative knowledge, but its primary purpose is to enable research participants to achieve practical solutions to significant problems (Bradbury, 2015a; Bradbury,

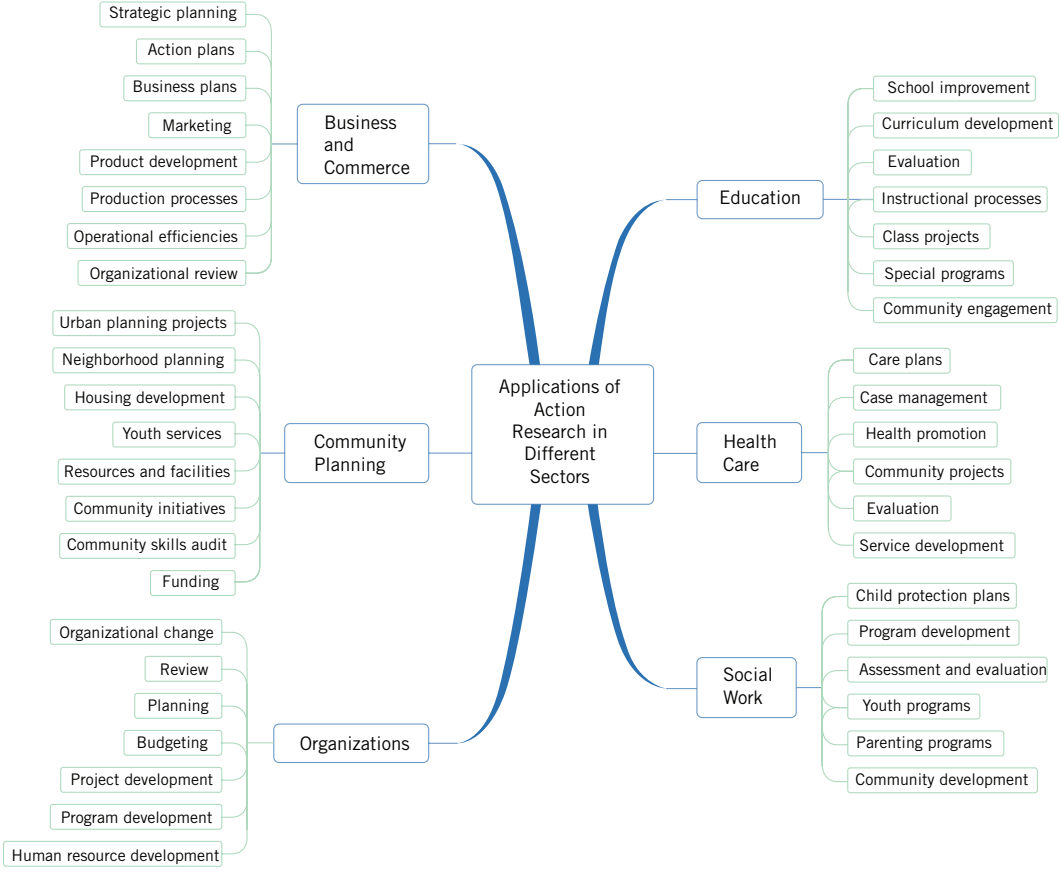
Glenzer, et al., 2019; Bradbury, Waddell, et al., 2019; Coghlan, 2019). If an action research project does not *make a difference,* in a specific way, for practitioners and other stakeholders, then it has failed to achieve its objective. The analogue of hypothesis testing in action research is some form of change or development tested by its ability to move toward the resolution of the problem under investigation. In the words of Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), success in action research can be seen when participants "have a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the situations in which they practice."

Action research has been employed successfully in many settings—schools, hospitals, health clinics, community agencies, government departments, rural communities, urban and suburban organizations, churches, youth clubs, ethnic groups, extension services, and many other situations. Factory workers, agency staff, school students, youth groups, young mothers, senior citizens, economically poor people, unemployed people, community groups, people with disabilities or illness, and so on have participated in action research studies to resolve issues that have impacted on their work, education, personal or community lives. Service professionals—social workers, community workers, teachers, nurses, doctors, managers and administrators, urban and community planners, and agency workers in a wide range of social contexts—likewise apply action research processes in the conduct of their everyday work.

People at all levels, therefore, may engage in action research projects for a variety of purposes. Health professionals, for example, may wish to investigate and remediate poor health conditions or practices (e.g., smoking, drinking, low birth weight, or inappropriate medication) within a particular community group to develop appropriate remedial strategies. Teachers may investigate strategies for dealing with low student achievement levels, poor attendance, student disinterest, or disruptive behavior. School principals may formulate programs for increasing community participation in their schools. Welfare workers may seek to act on the prevalence of child abuse or neglect among client groups. Community workers may wish to develop programs and projects to deal with the problems of neighborhood youth. Those involved in business may use action research procedures to improve organizational efficiency or effectiveness or to work more effectively with client groups. All will benefit from the use of procedures that enable them to explore systematically the conditions that operate in their specific contexts and that help them develop practical actions for dealing effectively with the problems that confront them.

Figure 1.2 indicates a wide array of situations in which action research processes can be used to more clearly understand sometimes complex issues and reveal practical steps that enable people to move toward their resolution.

Figure 1.2 Applications of Action Research in Different Professions



Who Does Action Research, and Why Do They Do It? Stories From the Field

The following accounts provide but a few examples of the many ways in which action research provides the means for people to work collaboratively to solve significant problems in their work, education, or community life. Each is distinctive in its own way but describes how systematic, participatory processes of investigation enabled participants to achieve outcomes that resolved significant problems in the social environment in which they were placed.

Education[2]

A teacher in an eighth-grade language arts class engaged the students in a voluntary research project concerning a school issue. In doing so she wished to cover a range of skills relevant to the state-mandated curriculum. A preliminary discussion with a group of girls identified sexual harassment as the number one issue facing them at school on a daily basis. It was a pervasive fact of life that was played out in classrooms, locker rooms, hallways, the cafeteria, and school buses, with one girl indicating that "nowhere is safe at school."

In following sessions the girls extended their understanding of their experience of sexual harassment, detailing ways and places that it happened and describing particular incidents that illustrated their concerns. They also reviewed literature from magazines and other sources, discovering that it was a widespread issue across the nation. The group wrote letters to their parents, asking their permission to participate, and to the school administration, explaining the nature of their study.

The group investigations, in which each of them and other students and adults were interviewed individually, revealed the many ways harassment had occurred, including some incidents that were quite shocking to them all. Conversations with the school counselor indicated he dealt with issues of sexual harassment on a daily basis and was concerned that lack of student awareness of what constituted sexual harassment led many to feel confused.

At the end of the year the girls decided to write a performance piece titled "Speaking Out," based on the key elements emerging from their investigations, to bring the issue to the attention of students and teachers. The script included information about ways to protect oneself when harassed and how to contact help when needed. They also constructed a triptych, a three-paneled piece where students could write down their ideas after the performance. They also wrote an article for the school newsletter that went to all students and their parents, checking with the school administration that it was OK to do this.

When "Speaking Out" was performed at the school's Student Forum, there was a standing ovation, and the three panels of the triptych were covered with statements of strengths and affirmation. In the following months, the School Police Officer reported that sexual harassment complaints had fallen from four to five per week to one every two weeks, a testimony to the power of the action research in which the teacher and the girls had been involved.

Business/Health

Barbara Horner, an experienced health professional, engaged the Senior Management Team (SMT) of an aged care community as partners in an action research project that

[2] A full description of this project may be found in Stringer (2007).

would assist their plans for redevelopment of the facility. Over a period of 2 years the outcomes of her research were integrated into the SMT's plan for the changes required to take account of changing circumstances of aged care funding. A particular concern of the SMT was that the need for changes to their operations resulting largely from financial concerns should not negatively impact on the well-being or quality of life of residents.

The study included two cycles of an action research process based largely on qualitative methods—participatory observation and semistructured interviews—as well as additional data from two quality of service surveys for residents and a staff satisfaction survey. One of the major purposes of the action research process was to communicate and explain the processes of change to residents and to monitor and manage the impact of changes on their well-being.

An initial review of literature related to the social and organizational dynamics of aged care revealed many issues to be addressed by the SMT as they planned the changes to their organization. This was complemented by a review of relevant documents and records that provided further information related to the operation of the facility. This assisted the research team to clarify the broader arena of aged care and the key issues to be taken into consideration as they moved forward. At this stage the research facilitator also attended meetings of the SMT, gaining an understanding of the facility's history, current situation and its challenges, issues and aspirations. In addition a period of reconnaissance also enabled the research facilitator to develop positive relationships with other staff and with residents.

In order to understand how residents were feeling about the impending changes, the facilitator engaged in interviews with a sample of residents from the low- and high-care centers and the independent living units. These interviews provided guidance for the development of a survey that explored issues related to administration services; village services such as assistance, security, and maintenance; and contracted services such as medical, podiatry, pharmacy, and hairdressing. Other questions sought to determine the levels of satisfaction with lifestyle services and facilities and with dissemination of information.

The study proved a great success, providing a continuing body of information that assisted the SMT to take into account a wide range of issues emerging from the study. These not only provided a resource for this facility but also suggested actions that might benefit other institutions and facilities affected by changing policies and circumstances of aged care. The positive impact of the study was also demonstrated by the formation of a Resident's Advisory Council that maintained an ongoing forum for residents to interact with the facility's management.

Economic Development

Jeremy Prince worked with a group of Pacific Island villagers who were concerned about the ongoing depletion of fish stocks that threatened their livelihoods. He first listened

to their stories that told of times when there were plenty of fish, including those highly valued that were now in exceedingly short supply. He continued to gather information from them about their current fishing habits and discovered that where as the villagers had previously fished mainly for larger fish that at one time were highly valued, they now talked of smaller fish as being more available and "sweeter."

With their help, he then started collecting data about the results of their fishing, the analysis revealing that the smaller fish making the major part of their catch were caught before they reached reproductive age. When this analysis emerged, it became easy for the villagers to understand that soon there would be no fish to catch. They then developed a plan to limit the size that fishermen could catch and the season when they could be caught.

This project became so successful that Jeremy was asked to extend his work to other villages and islands, working with each group to provide them with the methods of gathering and analyzing data related to their fishing activities.

Social Work

Youth crime became a major concern in Graceville, where police, social workers, school authorities, parents, and the courts were frustrated at continued occurrences of burglary, petty theft, vandalism, and drug and alcohol abuse, especially among young males. Casework interventions by social workers and continuing punitive measures by the courts failed to stem the tide of offenses that threatened family and community life. The situation was exacerbated by unemployment emerging from the economic downturn that had affected the city and by alcohol and drug abuse and violence that was common in the homes of offenders.

The continuing cycle of juvenile offenses created problems between agencies in the town, with police, welfare agency workers, schools, and parents criticizing each other and local parents for failure to curb the actions of youth. After abortive attempts to deal with the situation through casework and more punitive means, including placing offenders in care of the state, a coalition of workers from the city's human services agencies met to develop a plan of action for dealing more effectively with a situation that had reached crisis point.

Participants in the first meeting focused on a number of areas in which they thought they could take action. Their initial investigations revealed useful family networks in the community, including aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, and cousins of repeat offenders. Meetings with family groups of each offender built a picture of the situation, analyzing the problematics of their situation and exploring possibilities for action. Both agency workers and family members gained a clear picture of the situation and an understanding of the immediate and long-term harm likely to arise from its continuation. They were also able to devise actions at the family level that began to alleviate the issues with which offenders were faced.

The monthly interagency meetings then broadened their activities to include community leaders in an effort to extend their understanding of the broader issues impacting on community life and to identify the assets of skills and experience within the community. Using these assets, the group commenced an expanding series of activities that included regular social events and functions, a program that provides leisure time activities for young people that improved problem-solving skills, enhancing self-confidence and acquiring practical life skills.

The outcome of these activities has seen many young people engaging in positive activities and the development of a community spirit in the sections of town where they operated. They also enable people to come together to develop their capacity to deal with issues in an ongoing way. A further outcome has been for agency workers, police, health professionals, teachers, and others to increase their understanding of the place and the people in the city and to develop a greater awareness of the need to work collaboratively and holistically to create positive and healthy changes for the young people involved.

The literature is replete with many other examples of the different ways and contexts in which action research has been applied. A limited list includes three editions of the *Sage Handbook of Action Research* (Bradbury, 2015b; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, 2008), the *Wiley Handbook of Action Research* (Mertler, 2019), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research* (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), the action research "cookbooks" (Bradbury et al., 2017; Bradbury, Gerónimo, & Castillo, 2019), and many of the sources referenced in this text. Useful additions to this list may be found in the website associated with this text: **https://www.actionresearch5.com/**

Philosophical Foundations of Action Research

In the preceding sections of this chapter, we have described the general qualities and characteristics of action research, a simple set of procedures that guide the processes of inquiry, and a range of contexts where it can be usefully and effectively applied. This section speaks to three central principles that distinguish action research from other approaches to inquiry, suggesting how practitioners and other research participants might more systematically acquire knowledge that will better inform their actions. The three central principles are learning through (and for) action, acting informed by learning, and participation by those who know—that is, those with intimate knowledge of the context.

Learning Through Action

The primary purpose of action research is to commence with an *attitude of inquiry*, to collaboratively construct a preliminary understanding of the issues involved and then to instigate actions that further enhance participant insights

into the issues investigated. Continuing cycles of the Look–Think–Act routine provide the basis for a rich and more thorough understanding of the sometimes complex dynamics of the situation. The actions emerging within the research process provide the primary source of knowledge that fuels the main purposes of action research. Thinking, reflecting, and analysis alone will not provide the means to achieve the ultimate ends of an action research process.

Two ideas underlie this principle: First, when we try to affect, improve, or change something, the "real world" responds in ways that enable us to learn about the context and the people concerned. This idea is at the very heart of the oft-cited idea from Kurt Lewin (1948) that if you want truly to understand something, try to change it. Taking action generates knowledge in a dynamic manner and is therefore a powerful research method! Second, with action research the very purpose of research is to develop a better understanding of the issues we investigate and to utilize that knowledge in pursuit of worthwhile practical purposes. The example in Reflection 1.3 illustrates how small actions taken in learning processes might be used to support further actions.

The novelty of this first principle of learning through action may be slightly more geared toward academics and researchers, many of whom have been trained to observe the world in very prescribed ways. Traditionally, academic research was based on experimental processes in which researchers deliberately excluded themselves from participation in research processes. For many purposes, this is still a necessary aspect of experimental research. The researcher's role is to passively observe and analyze the processes and outcomes of their investigations. While action researchers believe we too can learn a lot by reading and by observing things, we believe we can learn even more by trying to change or improve them. Action researchers take quite a different stance, which might be characterized as *"Don't limit yourself to traditional passive ways of learning. Take action—you can learn much more if you get engaged!"*

Learning through action—by trying to change or improve things—reveals complex dynamics about everyday social life and highlights the fact that the purpose of learning (and of generating knowledge) is to provide better understanding of a situation to enable people to take appropriate and effective action to resolve their issues and problems.

Acting Informed by Learning

This second principle speaks to the importance of reflection in developing deep-seated insights that better inform our actions. This is about using the processes of investigation to derive understandings that enable more informed decisions as practitioners. This principle is particularly relevant to practitioners—that is, people in the field, such as nurses, teachers, engineers, law enforcement

Reflection 1.3: Alfredo—From Reflection to Action

Recently I was speaking to a friend who is a professor at a local community college. She told me that she was trying to get students in her psychology courses to understand the roles elderly people play in society, and why it is problematic that some people get "assigned away" to homes or other very reduced areas of public and social life once they reach a certain age. She wanted students to see how elderly people could continue to play important roles in society and remain a bigger part of our everyday interactions.

We quickly brainstormed how an action research approach might help her students better understand the realities of elderly people. We started by clarifying how a traditional university approach might include reading textbooks and other literature on the role of older people in different societies, including the United States. We could break the analysis down by regions where there are significant cultural differences. We could also include out-of-class research activities such as interviewing elderly people and those who engage with or work with elderly, including family members and workers in assisted living facilities. We thought those interviews were likely to yield helpful insights into the realities faced by elderly people, which would complement the readings.

Importantly, my friend wanted her students—most of whom are at an age where they are particularly unaware of realities elderly people face—to not only learn and become more aware but eventually engage differently with elderly people in the future. In other words, she is not content with them only increasing their understanding but for new understanding to lead to new behaviors—action.

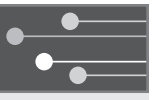
We thought about different ways action-oriented activities could help students learn about realities elderly people face. For example, helping them shop for their groceries at a store, taking them to a doctor's appointment, or participating in organized social activities with them. In doing active things with elderly people—becoming part of their regular lives, seeing the things that they enjoy, and experiencing the things they struggle with—students would learn a lot more about their situation than by just reading about it.

Part of the problem my friend wished to address was the social isolation and marginalization of a group of people who are often relegated to remain within their own social group and have little use in other spaces. The actions the students would take to learn about the situation would also help improve the situation, because by engaging with elderly people they would start to break down barriers through their action. Through acts of volunteering in ways that help elderly people, they would generate insights about their lived experiences, what works and what doesn't, and what potential exists for improvement. They would understand the realities elderly people face in ways not possible through readings and discussions alone, and their activities would not only generate greater understanding but also help improve the situation through meaningful interactions with elderly people over a period of time.

officers, social workers, and so on, whose main job is to get things done for or with a specific group of people. They are usually prepared with relevant knowledge in their field through formal or informal training, and they may apply frameworks of ideas from their respective professions. Unlike academic researchers, however, their main job is not to generate knowledge, to develop theory, or to publish results of research but to engage in forms of inquiry that enable them to resolve the complex issues they sometimes face. In their day-to-day work, *professional practitioners are always taking action*, learning as they go and making improvements to what they do.

It is our contention that if practitioners are able to pay a little more attention to how things are actually happening, they can be more effective in their work. By more consciously taking an *attitude of inquiry* (Marshall & Reason, 2007), they can engage their day-to-day work more thoughtfully and achieve better outcomes. *We can all become more effective practitioners if we more consciously learn from the experience we gain through the actions we take.*

Reflection 1.4: Alfredo—Reflective Practice



As a practitioner, I experienced a "lack of learning culture" working for many years in nonprofit management in the international development sector, where we often repeated the same ways of working year after year, largely because we were always in "doing" mode and had no systematic way of generating deep insights into our practice. For example, we continued to use methodologies based on somewhat outdated management's "best practices" for many years. Today I see the need to take time to reflect on my work, and my message to practitioners is this: "You could be a little bit more reflective in the way you do your work. Don't remain in 'doing' mode all day long. Carve out time, even half an hour, to just think about what you're doing, what is and isn't working, and why. Share your insights with others. If you were to be a little more reflective, document a little bit more, share what you're learning, re-plan, and do it again, you could really leverage knowledge for your practice in powerful ways that other people aren't doing."

Collaborating in Participative Research Processes

The third action research principle acknowledges that the people who are actively engaged in the on-the-ground challenges of any social context have deep levels of understanding about their own situation and might therefore be seen as "experts" and should therefore be directly involved in addressing those challenges. A fundamental premise of action research is that it commences with an interest in the problems of a group, a community, or an organization. Its purpose is to assist all people affected by a particular issue to build a greater understanding of their situation that enables them to resolve significant issues

Reflection 1.5: Ernie—Collaborative Approaches to Learning

A colleague of mine once had the task of presenting training programs on alcohol and drug abuse. Most of the participants were enrolled under court order, as part of their sentences for drug- or alcohol-related offenses. The program, which included information about the physical and psychological effects of alcohol and other drugs, was presented to an audience that was, from my colleague's accounts, almost completely unreceptive. "You could tell that they didn't want to be there and that they wouldn't believe anything I said to them anyway," he commented. "It was a real waste."

I previously had been involved in a workshop given by a senior academic to a community group that had requested a program that would help them better understand the devastating effects of alcohol consumption. The workshop included exploration of a complex three-factor model of drinking behavior that taxed my intellectual capabilities and required considerable concentration on the part of the other participants. As the workshop progressed, they pointed out that the model was inadequate relative to some of the realities of their community life and suggested modifications that would improve it. All participants worked energetically throughout the afternoon, to the extent that the facilitator commented that he was able to cover more ground in that afternoon than he could in 3 weeks of coursework with his postgraduate students. The energy, involvement, and motivation of the participants reflected their orientation to the processes of the workshop. It made sense from their perspective and spoke to issues that concerned them.

or problems they experience. Put another way, action research provides a model for enacting local, action-oriented approaches to inquiry, applying small-scale theorizing to specific problems in specific situations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Action research therefore envisages a collaborative approach to investigation that engages those previously called "subjects" as equal and full participants in the research process.

Action research is always enacted in accordance with an explicit set of social values that have the following characteristics:

- It is *democratic*, enabling the participation of all people.
- It is *equitable,* acknowledging people's equality of worth.
- It is *liberating,* providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
- It is life *enhancing,* enabling the expression of people's full human potential.

Action research works on the assumption, therefore, that all stakeholders—those whose lives are affected by the problem under study—should be engaged in the processes of investigation. This may include children and other groups who are often overlooked as participants, even as their interests and knowledge are central to the process (see Lit Corner 1.1). Stakeholders participate in a process of rigorous inquiry, acquiring information (collecting data) and reflecting on that information (analyzing) to transform their understanding about the nature of the problem under investigation (theorizing). This new set of understandings is then applied to plans for resolution of the problem (action), which, in turn, provides the context for testing hypotheses derived from group theorizing (evaluation).

Collaborative exploration assists research participants to develop increasingly sophisticated understandings of the problems and issues that confront them. In reflecting on their situation together, they can repudiate social myths, misconceptions, and misrepresentations and formulate more constructive analyses of their situation. By sharing their diverse knowledge and experience—expert, professional, and lay—stakeholders can create solutions to their problems and, in the process, improve the quality of their community life.

To the extent that people can participate in the process of exploring the nature and context of the problems that concern them, they have the opportunity to develop immediate and deeply relevant understandings of their situation and to be involved actively in the process of dealing with those problems. The task in these circumstances is to provide a climate that gives people the sense that they are in control of their own lives and that supports them as they take systematic action to improve their circumstances.

Participation is most effective when it

- enables significant levels of active involvement,
- enables people to perform significant tasks,
- provides support for people as they learn to act for themselves,
- encourages plans and activities that people are able to accomplish themselves,
- deals personally with people rather than with their representatives or agents.

It is important to note that the very quality of knowledge that is gained through action or through traditional research methods largely depends on the sources of that knowledge. Whose knowledge is included? By having clients, students, colleagues, and other stakeholders involved as participants and co-researchers, action research processes can widen access to their knowledge and increase

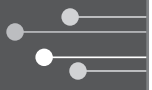
Lit Corner 1.1: Children as Key Knowledge Holders in Developing Play Areas for Their Own Benefit

Nah and Lee (2016) were seeking to generate tangible benefits in children's learning by inviting their participation in the development of outdoor play areas in a childcare center in a city in South Korea. The action research project involved the two researchers, a teacher, and her 25 students who ranged in age from 5 to 6 years. The researchers worked with the teacher and her students to improve an outdoor play area during a 9 month project designed to respond to their expressed needs for better outdoor play opportunities. Children participated in planning through weekly classroom activities in which they shared ideas about how to organize and manage future classroom activities (to develop a more democratic classroom environment), visited nearby playgrounds, and watched videos of playgrounds in other countries. Photos taken of and by the children, as well as interviews and reflective writing, contributed to discussions and to children creating and trying out various ideas, such as a mini golf course, in their play area. Children also selected some of the data generation methods, such as photographs taken by them, while the educator facilitated ongoing reflection in various ways, including by role-playing a journalist when she interviewed her students as they examined their photographs. These and other actions yielded multiple data sources, which were analyzed by the researchers using a grounded theory open-coding approach. "The project was therefore open-ended, essentially representing the product of continuous collaboration among the educator, the children, and the researchers, with a particular focus on the reflections of the children's perspectives" (Nah & Lee, 2016, p. 339).

The action research process showed that child-centered methods allowed young children to express their opinions and participate in decisions in ways that led them to become more assertive as learners, which also created disruptions to traditionally held views of power among various actors in the childcare center's community. The use of child-centered methods allowed the young students to become not only knowledgeable participants but also co-creators of their environments. This led to a profound change in the teacher's perception of her students as "teachers got to examine their deep beliefs about who has, and should have, voice, which leads to a deeper inquiry about children's rights and capacities. In turn, the teachers begin to enact different practices than those they have been conditioned with from birth and through their own education" (Bradbury, Lewis, & Embury, 2019, p. 8). The process also created a move toward more wide scale nature-based learning in the teacher's pedagogical approach.

their ownership of the change processes in which we engage. Participation by those with local knowledge is the key ingredient to effective understanding and sustained improvement.

Reflection 1.6: Ernie—Empowering Participation



The ability of ordinary people to engage in complex organizational work usually deemed the province of professionals has been demonstrated many times. One of the most striking examples I have seen was a community school set up by an Aboriginal group in a remote region of Australia. Weary of sending their young children 150 miles away to the nearest town for schooling, members of the community asked a young teacher to assist them in developing their own school. Untrained for this specialized task, she nevertheless worked with members of the community for some months to build the school from the ground up. Together, they formulated the curriculum and timetable, acquired teaching materials and equipment, secured funding, learned how to satisfy legal and bureaucratic requirements, and built a large, grass-covered hut for a school building. When this small school commenced operation, all classes were taught in one room, with community members helping to teach academic subjects, art, music, and language. The cultural style of the classroom was distinctively Aboriginal, with children happily and busily interacting in small groups, their work supervised by community members and the non-Aboriginal teacher. It was the most successful Aboriginal school I have seen in regard to the enthusiasm and engagement of the children and the sense of energy and excitement that typified the school's operation. Most striking, however, was the sense that community members considered it to be their school and the degree to which they continued, through an extended period, to invest their meager financial resources and considerable time and energy in its operation.

Since I saw that school in operation, I have come across many other contexts, including those in the United States, where teachers collaborated with their students, parent groups, and colleagues to make deep-seated changes in their schools and classrooms. I have seen striking work in an urban classroom, a successful school comprised largely of Hispanic high-school dropouts, and transformative processes enacted by a neighborhood group in an elementary school in a poor, largely Hispanic community. What I initially saw in rural and remote Australian contexts seems to have applications in many diverse contexts.

The payoffs for this approach to research are potentially enormous. Not only do research participants acquire the individual capacity to engage in systematic research that they can apply to other issues in other contexts, but they also build a supportive network of collaborative relationships that provides them with an ongoing resource. Solutions that emerge from the research process therefore become more sustainable, enabling people to maintain the momentum of their activity over extended periods of time. Links established in one project may provide access to information and support that build the power of the people in many different ways.

Participation is not only about expanding our knowledge but also about being more realistic about who can actually change things and who can't. It's about recognizing that people need to want to change their own situation for it to change and that we have very limited abilities as individuals. We need to connect knowledge, experience, and effort—to generate positive change and deeper understanding. Although this flies in the face of individualistic ways of thinking about research and professional practice, participation by those who have extended experience and understanding of the settings and issues investigated is an ethical, practical, and strategic imperative in action research (Ortiz Aragón & Hoetmer, 2020).

Principles of Practice

The three central principles presented previously provide the basic philosophical foundation for effective action research. Each, however, requires translation into the processes and practices whereby we are able to achieve the practical and ethical improvements that are the desired outcomes of our research activities. This section reveals principles of practice designed for these purposes.

Relationships

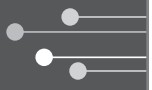
This is perhaps the most important principle of practice. The type, nature, and quality of relationships developed in an action research project have direct impacts on the quality of people's experience and, through that, the quality of outcomes of the process. Action research has a primary interest, therefore, in establishing and maintaining positive working relationships.

Relationships in action research should

- promote feelings of equality for all people involved,
- maintain harmony, when possible,
- engage conflicts openly and dialogically in ways that broaden perspectives and increase empathy,
- accept people as they are, not as some people think they ought to be,
- encourage personal, cooperative relationships, rather than impersonal, competitive, conflictual, or authoritarian relationships,
- be sensitive to people's feelings.

Key concepts: equality, harmony, acceptance, cooperation, sensitivity

Reflection 1.7: Ernie—Engaging People's Potential



There are many examples of the way this can operate. I've seen highly effective classrooms where teachers organized students into collaborative work groups to investigate ways to clearly define their learning goals and formulate strategies to accomplish them. I've seen community nurses engage people with chronic health conditions to assist them in establishing ways to live more comfortably and deal effectively with issues confronting them in their day-to-day lives. I've seen youth workers accomplish wonderfully effective programs for marginalized youth that have transformed the communities in which they lived. At the heart of all these activities has been a process of discovery involving the people themselves—clients, students, local youth groups, and so on. In each case the people acquired the capacity to become self-directed and self-sufficient, acquiring a supportive group of peers who could assist them and support them as they engaged the tasks before them.

The effect on the people themselves often has been quite dramatic. At the completion of one action research project, I asked the women in the participating neighborhood group about their experience. One burst out excitedly, "It was such an empowering experience!" As they explored this comment further, it was clear that the women had really appreciated that people had listened seriously to their viewpoints, that they had learned so much, and that they had been actively involved in the research. Originally this project was to have been carried out by research consultants, but with assistance from a local university professor, the members of the neighborhood group had engaged in a "survey" of parent and teacher perspectives on a school issue. The result not only provided the basis for ongoing developments within the school but provided members of the neighborhood group with the capacity and desire to apply their newfound knowledge to a project in a local high school, where they opened a community-based student support center. This was clearly a case where participants had built their capacity to engage in research as well as increased the capability of the school to engage in much-needed changes to procedures for communicating with parents.

In my professional life, I have often seen programs that isolate people from their families or communities. I have seen services that demean the recipients and organizations and agencies that operate according to rules and regulations that are shamelessly insensitive to the cultures of their clients. I have seen young children isolated from their families for months, sometimes years at a time, in order to be given a "good education." I have seen police fail to act on violence against women because the women were drunk. I have seen millions of dollars wasted on training programs that were purportedly designed to serve community needs but that failed to reach the people for whom they were formulated. I have seen health clinics that were incapable of serving rural community needs because they operated according to practices common in city hospitals. In one community, I was shown the boys' and girls' hostels for high school children, isolated from each other by the length of the town, with the girls' hostel protected by a barbed-wire fence. The administrator who showed me these institutions was proud that "we haven't had an illegitimate pregnancy in years" and seemed unaware of the

Continued

Reflection 1.7: Ernie—Engaging People's Potential (Continued)

potential for enormous damage to family and community life inherent in the situation.

The list goes on and on, reflecting the failure of centrally controlled social, educational, health, welfare, and community services to adapt and adjust their operations to the social, cultural, and political realities of the specific locations where they operated. I grieve for the people who have been damaged in the process, including those workers who have become hardened to the plight of the client groups they serve.

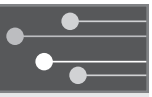
I have seen other situations, however, in which administrators, professional practitioners, and workers engaged the energy and potential of the people they served to develop highly effective programs and services. I have seen women's groups that provided for significant needs within their communities, police initiatives that greatly enhanced the peacekeeping mission of the department, and health programs that greatly reduced the incidence of trachoma. I have also seen education and training programs traditionally shunned by marginalized groups become so successful that they were unable to accommodate the numbers of people requesting entry. I have also applauded community youth programs that were able to unite hostile community factions to diminish the problems of young people in their town. I rejoice in them. They have in common a developmental process that maximized the participation of the people they served.

I have written elsewhere of the success of an independent school started by the community in which it operated. It stands in stark contrast to another school I visited. The principal, hired by an outside agency, proudly related the story of the new high school he had set up. With little assistance or support, he had organized the renovation of the school building, bought the furniture and equipment, designed the curriculum, and hired the teachers. "I have only one major problem," he confided. "I can't get the parents to show any interest."

The force of this type of event is to sensitize us to the need to be consciously aware of the nature of relationships in our everyday professional lives. It suggests the need to reject styles of interaction that emphasize status and power and to move to more consensual modes of operation. It implies the need to develop cooperative approaches to work and harmonious relations between and among people and to reject the aggressive, impersonal, and manipulative relations characteristic of many bureaucratic systems. It emphasizes collegial relationships, rather than those based on hierarchy, and leadership roles that help and support people rather than direct and control them.

When we seek to organize any set of activities within an organizational or community setting, we need to examine the type, nature, and quality of relationships among clients, practitioners, administrators, and other stakeholders. At the base of a productive set of relationships is people's ability to feel that their ideas and agendas are acknowledged and that they can make worthwhile contributions to the common enterprise. This ultimately is at the core of the processes of a democratic society.

Reflection 1.8: Ernie—Relationships Matter

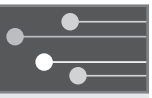


A new manager was appointed to supervise the work of a group of social workers with whom I was acquainted. Having little experience in the work of these experienced practitioners, and being ambitious, this manager set out to impress her superiors with her efficiency and effectiveness. She embarked on projects that her staff considered inappropriate and put great pressure on them to work in ways that she perceived to be efficient. In the process, she tried to have them act in ways that were contrary to their previously effective work routines and constantly referred to her superior, the director, when they disputed her direction.

Within a short time, work conditions deteriorated dramatically. The social workers struggled to maintain their operation and, in the process, experienced great frustration and stress to the extent that they started to experience both physical and emotional problems. One staff member took a series of extended leaves, another began visits to a psychiatrist, and another transferred to a different section, her position being filled by a series of temporary workers. Eventually, the manager, also under stress, left the agency, and the entire section was disbanded.

This situation is, unfortunately, not an isolated one. Practitioners who have worked in organizational or institutional settings for any length of time will find the scenario all too familiar. Relationships matter.

Reflection 1.9: Ernie—Important Mentors



I am reminded of one of the really fine school principals with whom I served. He was, to me, a leader in the fullest sense of the word. Knowledgeable and skillful, he provided me, a young teacher then, with suggestions for ways to improve my teaching that did not imply that I was not already a capable teacher, suggesting or indicating the areas of weakness in my teaching without making me feel put down; he enhanced my feelings of competence and worth by praising my strengths. He was Dick to us teachers much of the time but became Mr. Filmer when the occasion warranted our serious attention or in the more formal moments of ritualized school activities. The words gentleman *and* scholar *in their best older senses come to my mind. He was a leader of stature and capability who still provides me with the touchstones by which I evaluate my relationships with colleagues, students, and clients. I still cherish the memory of the time I spent with Dick Filmer.*

Including Stakeholders

Participatory process is a foundational principle of action research, but a special feature of its practice is to ensure that all stakeholders are included.