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CHAPTER FIVE

THE BEGINNING

"But how do I start for Emerald City?" Dorothy asked. Glinda replied, "It's always best to start at the beginning. And all you do is follow the Yellow Brick Road."

—*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS

Chapter 2 described six essential parts of action research. In this chapter, these six parts are broken down further into nine steps. These steps are meant to be a guideline to be adapted to your particular research topic or situation. Also, as stated previously, there is no universal order to these steps. You might find yourself skipping steps, rearranging their order, or repeating some steps more than once.

Action Research Steps

1. *Identify a problem or research topic.* The first step is to decide what to study. What are you curious about? What piques your interest? Ask a question, identify a problem, or define an area of interest for exploration. Find something that intrigues you, something you would really like to examine in depth.

2. *Set the problem or research topic in a theoretical context.* This means doing a review of the literature. (This is described in detail in Chapter 6 and Chapter 14.) Look in professional journals, books, and web sources to see what others have found out or have to say about your research topic. Relating your research topic to current theories gives you more credibility and provides a theoretical context for your findings. Also, this enables you to link theory and practice by connecting what you find in the literature to what is happening in your classroom.

You might take one of three approaches in doing a literature review. The first approach is to do the review of the literature before you begin collecting data. Besides setting your study in a theoretical context, the literature might also be used

to help formulate your question, refine a pedagogical method to be studied, or give you ideas for collecting data. The second approach is to review the literature as you report the data and make your conclusions. The literature is related to each of your concluding points. The third approach is not to do a review of the literature at all. Many short action research projects do not include this element.

As you can see, you have a certain amount of freedom in organizing your action research project. The onus is on you, however, to create a credible and coherent report. Linking your study to theories and previous research is one way to do this.

3. *Make a plan for data collection.* In traditional research this is known as methodology. What data are you going to study? How are you going to collect the data? How often will you collect data? Action research is not impressionistic. Nor is it a brochure supporting a particular teaching methodology. Rather, action research is a systematic observation; therefore, data collection must be focused and the elements of data collection must be determined *before* the research begins.

4. *Begin to collect and analyze data.* After you have identified at least two kinds of data, you begin the data collection process. As you collect your data, analyze them by looking for themes, categories, or patterns that emerge. This analysis will influence further data collection by helping you to know what to look for.

5. *If necessary, allow the question or problem to change as you collect data.* Action research is a dynamic, ever-changing process. As a human you cannot help but be influenced by the data you collect. It is very common, therefore, to change a particular teaching strategy, the sources of data, or even the focus of the study as you are collecting data. This is acceptable as long as you let the reader know what you did and why you did it. That is, in writing your report take the reader along with you in all phases of your action research.

6. *Analyze and organize the data.* Hopefully you have been analyzing and organizing the data as you have been collecting them, thus, step 6 should be the final step of an ongoing process. In analyzing your data you need to establish how many total things were recorded, how many categories or kinds of things there are, and how many things are in each category. This is a quick view of analytic induction, which is described in Chapter 8.

7. *Report the data.* Present the facts or findings. This presentation includes an overview with detailed descriptions and illustrative samples of important events, activities, and responses. Also reported are the number and types of themes, categories, or patterns present in the data. In this section of your report you take the role of a journalist or anthropologist by describing what you saw and providing examples that demonstrate your perceptions.

8. *Make your conclusions and recommendations.* The next step is to interpret the data or tell the reader what they mean. Based on the data, what can you conclude? What do you recommend based on your conclusions? You then answer your research question, provide answers for a problem, or make suggestions based on your new understanding. Also, as stated in step 2, some action researchers do a review of the literature at this point to set their conclusions in a theoretical context.

9. *Create a plan of action.* This is where you put the action in action research. Based on your conclusions and recommendations, what will you do? You create a plan of action. And as you implement your plan of action, you assess what is happening or how effective it is; thus, the action research cycle continues.

FINDING YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC

To begin you must first determine an area to research. Three common research possibilities include the following: (a) study or evaluate a teaching method, (b) identify and investigate a problem, or (c) examine an area of interest.

A Method

Would you like to try a new teaching method or technique? Maybe you want to see how a writing workshop works. Perhaps you are interested in finding out what happens if you let students choose their own writing topics. What new method or teaching idea might you be willing to experiment with in your classroom?

Chris Reed, a primary grade teacher, was intrigued by the idea of using an embedded approach to spelling. Instead of the prescribed list of spelling words and traditional approaches to spelling instruction, she used words found in students' literature and science units and created her own activities. Some weeks she also experimented with allowing students to choose their own words to study. She wanted to see whether this approach was effective in improving students' ability to spell under real writing conditions. As she started her action research project, she also became interested in seeing whether this approach was more enjoyable for her students, what effects it might have on students' writing, what kind of words students chose to study, and how these words related to the lives of students.

Mary Kaymeyer, a fifth-grade teacher, had always loved teaching her poetry unit in language arts, but, because of a crowded curriculum, she felt she never had enough time to really enjoy and explore this form as much as she would like. She decided try embedding poetry across her fifth-grade curriculum. Mary redesigned her curriculum so that poetry was included in social studies, math, science, health, and reading as well as in language arts classes. Poetry was used to reinforce important concepts and to create alternatives to tests and written reports in helping students organize and demonstrate their knowledge. After her first year of using this approach, she decided to use action research to see how it was going and to provide support for either continuing or abandoning this idea.

Identifying a Problem

Do you think a subject or an area in your teaching does not flow as well as others? Do you think a particular problem in your school or classroom is disrupting the learning process? Action research is a tool that can be used to systematically study a problem area. It can be used to understand what is happening and the possible causes of the problem. It can be used to explore various solutions. Also, a review of

the literature can be used to help connect the literature to the problem and to find solutions that others may have tried.

Al Norton, a high school social studies teacher, noticed that the students in his senior-level classes seemed to be bored and disinterested. They appeared to be going through the motions on weekly assignments and often were talking or zoning out during class. He conducted a series of short written surveys and class discussions to find out what students were interested in, what they wanted to learn, how they best liked to learn, and what was useful in helping them understand new ideas. This allowed Al to connect his social studies curriculum to issues that were relevant to students. A review of the literature gave him ideas for using different teaching strategies and activities. Al also shared his findings with his students and, in so doing, modeled a method of inquiry used by social scientists.

Examining an Area of Interest

Are you interested in a particular topic? Are you curious about something? Action research can be used to explore your interests. For example, Jim Soderholm, a middle school English teacher, has always been interested in comedy and humor. He wanted to discover what middle school students found funny and how they used humor in their socialization process. He began his study by recording instances of students' humor that he observed in classes, in the halls, or in other situations. From this, he created a form that allowed him quickly to note the instance of humor, the name and gender of the humorist, the recipient of the humor, and the type of humor (see Figure 5.1).

FIGURE 5.1 Form for Recording Students' Humor

Date: Time: Place/setting:

Name of humorist: Gender:

Humor recipient:

Type of humor:

Key for humor recipient: 1 = student to student; 2 = student to teacher; 3 = student to anybody

Key for type of humor: P = physical humor; S = sarcastic; A = absurd or silly; W = word play; S = sexual

This project improved Jim's teaching in three ways. First, it helped him further his understanding of his students and the nature of their social interactions and emotional status. Second, he found humor to be a hot topic for these middle school students. This led him to incorporate humor into his English curriculum by teaching students to write and perform their own stand-up routines and comedy sketches. Third, Jim shared the findings of his action research with his students. They were fascinated by what he discovered and the process he used. This led to him teaching students how to do their own inquiry projects. Jim was able to use their accompanying reports as vehicles for teaching technical writing skills, oral speaking, and presentation techniques.

SUMMARY

- The six parts of action research described in Chapter 2 can be broken down further into nine steps: (a) identify a problem or research topic; (b) set the problem or research topic in a theoretical context; (c) make a plan for data collection; (d) begin to collect and analyze data; (e) allow the question or problem to change as you collect data; (f) analyze and organize the data; (g) report the data; (h) make your conclusions and recommendations; and (i) create a plan of action.
- The order and nature of these nine steps should be adapted to suit the demands of one's research topic and teaching situation.
- Finding a topic or an area of interest is one of the beginning steps of an action research project.
- Three research possibilities are to examine a teaching method, a problem, or an area of interest.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Describe the new teaching methods or ideas you would like to try.
2. Generate a list of problems or areas that might be improved in your school or classroom.
3. Describe your interests related to teaching, learning, or human interaction.