Action Research:  
A Strategy in Community Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses the essence of action research in terms of meaning and significance in community education. Based on its emphases that are participatory, educational, collaborative and contextual bound, action research has been identified as one of the strategies in generating knowledge that could be used to help community undergo sustainable social improvements. This paper describes how action research, being problem-based, action-based, responsive, and practical can serve as one of the best research approaches in dealing with community issues. The discussion on its cyclic framework consisting of situational analysis, intervention and evaluation is also pursued in this paper as to give a clear picture on the interlinked process involved in the conduct of such research. Readers will be able to understand that action research actually means research and action that can be simultaneously achieved by the researcher and all participants involved in the study. Towards the end of the discussion, several points are shared on several factors contributing to the success of community learning through action research, such as worth of the program, enjoyment, freedom, and sense of belonging. Some highlights from real community cases in Malaysia were showcased to indicate the practicality and applicability of action research.

Keywords: Action research, community education, participatory research, adult education.

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a form of research approach that has both theoretical and practical implications in the fields of social sciences that include education, social services, and community development. Much is still unknown about the meaning, the roles and application of action research, and how is it different from the conventional research approach. Therefore, the objectives of this paper are i) To discuss the meaning of action research; ii) To highlight the significance of action research in community education, and iii) To present an application of action research in a local context.

MEANING OF ACTION RESEARCH

The term “action research” was invented and introduced by an eminent social scientist, Kurt Lewin in 1946 (Gronhaug and Olson, 1999). As a pioneer, he emphasized the importance of making use of scientific inquiry for social improvements. He also stressed the fact that to suggest adequate actions and make social changes, situational knowledge about the people and the environments was needed.

Action research differs from other research approaches in that it assumes the close relationship between research and action. This means that action and research proceed in a parallel form or there is a 2-way bond between theory and practice. Action research depends upon a collaborative problem solving relationship between the researcher and the researched (client), which aims to solve a problem, and to generate new knowledge. Rowley’s (2003) characterizations of action research explain:

1. Action researches take action: Action research is very responsive and practical in nature. Its goal is to promote strategies and interventions that could produce changes or improve situations. For example, the issue of English non-proficiency among students in a sub-urban school was disturbing the parents and community of that particular district. They were very dissatisfied with the ways English is taught in that school. In order to ensure that their voices are heard, some committee members of the teacher-parents association conducted observations and actual interviews to find out the real cause of the persisting problem. They wanted to produce a list of recommendations that could improve the situation.
ii. Action research always involves the two goals of problem solving (the role of consultant); and making a contribution to knowledge (the role of researcher): Since it is a methodology that is always intended to have both action outcomes and research outcomes, action research usually involves the problem-solving and knowledge building process. Action research is problem solving in the sense that it investigates those weak linkages or chains that affect the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole system. It provides information, understanding and facts to make more credible plans for solid implementations on the investigated issue (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In line with that, action research contributes to the expansion of the body of knowledge. In the process of proposing remedies, an action researcher also creates, assimilates, disseminates and applies knowledge related to the recommended transformation of the investigated system (Kotnour, 2001).

iii. Action research requires interaction and cooperation between researchers and the client personnel: Action research is participative in nature in the sense that it demands close interactions between action researchers and client personnel in order to diagnose and identify the root cause of a problem, and the extent to which other players are implicated. Without cooperation, involvement and commitment of those at the research location, the researcher will not be able to obtain sufficient amount of data for accurate assessment. In addition to that, the communications between both parties also allow the researcher to understand and meet the expectations of the clientele. In short, action research would not be successful without participation from both, the researcher as well as the community in which the research is conducted. Only close interactions will give opportunities for the action researcher to understand the complex real-life problem and clients’ needs.

iv. Action research can include all types of data gathering techniques such as structured questionnaires, observations, focused group interviews and individual interviews: There are no restrictions in terms of the data collection techniques that could be used in collecting the data from the subjects at the research location. Data can be collected via a single technique or by combining several techniques. For example, an action researcher may have opted survey as the best technique for his or her study. Some other action researchers may view the combination of observation and focus group interviews as the best data collection method. As a matter of fact, the techniques to be chosen depend on the context as well as the goal of the research.

Rowley (2003) further distinguishes the three different meanings of action research in which the researcher plays different roles in the context of work-based learning. The roles include:

i. Diagnostic research, in which the researcher gathers the data and presents them to those who are supposed to make an action: In this case, the researcher is involved mainly in the inquiry process, which is at the initial stage of the action research cycle. This usually happens when the researchers are non-members of the community. They do not belong in the research location. Those in the research location work closely with the researchers in order to enable the diagnostic process by providing extensive access into their system. Meaning, members of the research location will closely cooperate to provide all the possible information and data needed in order to allow the researcher to have deep understanding of the problem. At the end of the day, the results of the study shall be handed over to the community itself for actions.

ii. The researcher collects data from participants, in a system and provides feedback about the findings of the data as an intervention, to influence ongoing action: In this case, the action researchers are involved stage one and stage two of the action research cycle, that is the situational analysis and intervention. This can happen when action researchers are members or non-members of the research location community. The researchers, again with strong cooperation and participation of members in the research location, will diagnose the problem areas in the inquired system. This is done through various techniques such as observation, survey, interview and/ or focus group discussions. At the completion of stage one (situational analysis and diagnosis), the result will be disseminated to members of the community. By disseminating the findings, researchers could then gain additional input from the members in order to draw suitable types of interventions for that particular case.

iii. The researcher participates in a social system and is involved in a data collection process, and they use the data for action. In this case, the researchers are involved in the whole cycle of action research. Meaning, the researchers are rigorously involved in the inquiry, intervention and evaluation process. This usually happens when
researchers themselves are members of the community. They draw the problem analysis and explore the solutions together. After possible interventions are proposed and implemented, the researchers will usually go into the third round of evaluating the whole process and impact of the interventions. Reflection will be done to see whether or not the improvement practices meet the needs and expected outcomes.

Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1996) give the simplest definition of action research that is “the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within the social system”. They finally conclude that action research is a method in which members of an organization or community (the researched) work collaboratively with a facilitator (the researcher) to address problem of the organization or community.

FRAMEWORK OF ACTION RESEARCH

A voluminous body of literature confirms that the very nature of action research is its cyclical form. Based on the work by Cardno and Piggot-Irvine (1996) and Rowley (2003), a framework of action research is developed comprising three major cycles of activity (see Figure 1). Each cyclic phase incorporates steps of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The cycles are as follows:

- **Cycle one**: Situational analysis
- **Cycle two**: Intervention
- **Cycle three**: Evaluation

**Situational Analysis**

This is a pre-stage of the research process, focusing on the establishment of the research context for the necessary intervention. The various internal and external factors to the researched community are identified and analyzed to suggest that a change is necessary. The analysis and diagnosis of problems and needs must be done in a collaborative nature, so that the process commences with a shared understanding of the vision and mission of the research.

**Intervention**

Intervention is the process of taking action on the strategies and activities that have been planned during the planning stage of the first cycle. Intervention is also called the implementation of the activities as agreed upon by the various groups involved in the action research.

**Evaluation**

Evaluating action is the step that offers the opportunity to focus on the outcomes of the intervention. Outcomes are evaluated in terms of whether the desired results have been achieved, the diagnosis is correct, and the action taken is appropriate. It is worth noting here that in every cycle of the action research there is a process called “meta learning” occurring to the participants and the researchers. Meta learning is an experiential learning cycle consisting of activities such as understanding, planning, acting, observing, reflecting and interpreting, of the activities that one acts on. These processes are actually the core components of learning in any action research. Researchers need to develop skills at each activity. Similarly, they need to be able to experience, stand back and ask questions, be able to conceptualize answers to questions, and be able to take risks.
SIGNIFICANCE OF ACTION RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education refers to strategies adopted in order to bring about changes to the community using an interventional approach, by educators who are normally external to the community system. Action research has been identified as a strategy used in community education due to its nature and purposes. The following criteria, adopted from Blaxter, Hughers and Tight (2001) have been used to signify action research in community education. Action research:

1. **Is educative:** Any research which is an action research should be educative in the sense that a theory will be tried out with a community’s real-life situation, gain feedback from the experience, modify theory as the result of the feedback and try the theory again (Avison, Lau, Myers and Nielsen, 1999). As such, the whole conduct of an action research is experimental and educative in nature. Hence, theory building plays a major part in such research.

2. **Deals with individuals as members of social groups:** In order to obtain accurate diagnosis of complex, underlying problem in a situation, action researcher must be participatory. The researcher not only interacts very closely with individuals belonging to the community, but also tries to fit into the community setting by being involved in the culture, norms, mission and other social, economics, political or religious aspects of the community. Through intense participation, real causes of the problem could be unveiled.
3. **Is problem-focused, context-specific and future-oriented:** The main idea of an action research is to provide problem solving for a particular context or setting. It is actually a form of problem-based learning. Diagnosis, data collection and data analysis are done to generate practical recommendations for the existing problem based on derived findings. The target is to produce more effective and efficient operations of the current system.

4. **Involves a change intervention:** Action research is actually action and research: The actions take in the form of change interventions. In line with that, change intervention has always been among the core business of action research. Without interventions, the action research cyclic will not be complete. Besides theory building and being context-based, an action research’s product must be packaged with change interventions. Since the researcher usually has to fit him or herself as a member of the studied social group, the directives of the change interventions or tools are normally inline with available resources, needs and expectations of the social group or community of the research location.

5. **Aims at improvement and involvement:** The emphasis of a research action is on what practitioners should do to ensure a better state of the community system or operations, rather than on what they say they would do. It is very objective and result-oriented. Involvement of all related parties is always essential in an action research as to ensure improvements for current situations.

6. **Involves cyclic process in which research, action and evaluation are interlinked:** All the three elements in the action research cycle are interlinked in the sense that it allows action, and research to be achieved at the same time (Dick, 2002). In the process of improving the investigated context, some of the actions will improve the research and some part of the research will help to improve the actions. Hence, the cyclic is rather flexible in its movement. It does not end at evaluation. Most often, reflection and evaluation occurs at the beginning, middle and end of the cycle. The same goes for research and action. For example, based on a problem, the researcher evaluates the current situation in order to come up with plans of actions. The acted out plans of actions are then evaluated again to see whether or not they successfully meet the expected outcomes.

7. **Is founded on a research relationship in which those involved are participants in the learning process:** Another important criterion of action research is the fact that people affected by the problem is involved the research. They are also affected by introduced changes. Members’ participation allows better understanding of the problem context and possible interventions that could be preceded based on available resources and capabilities of the community members. This will hence pool more sharing and commitment among all members of the community towards the change tools and aspirations of their community. No wide gap exists between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘doer’ in action research.

The above criteria point to the conclusion as put by Earl-Slater (2002) that action research is a fancy way of saying “let’s study what’s happening and decide how to make it a better place for people or community to live in.” The criteria also show that action research can be very demanding but also very rewarding in terms of its significance. For these reasons, action research would involve an extensive component of fieldwork, as opposed to other traditional research approaches. Another strength of action research is that it often blends qualitative and quantitative techniques as neither form of research alone will provide all the answers to key questions on what to do, who should do it and how it should be done and why.

Another prominent feature of action research is its participative nature in majority of its actions. This is an advanced version of the approach, and therefore, Thomas (2003) refers to it as “participatory action research.” The meaning of this newer concept is that some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the research process from initiation to final action. This is in contrast with the conventional model of research, in which the researched community or organization are treated as passive subjects.

**WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL ACTION RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITY EDUCATION?**

Based on classic theory of Glasser (1984) cited in Zuber-Skerritt (2002) on factors contributing to the success of community learning through action research, he found out four categories of factors that are relevant, namely, worth of the program, enjoyment, freedom, and sense of belonging.

i. **Worth of the program:** This refers to the tangible results seen at the end of the program. Team members and participants are recognized publicly. This enhances feeling of self-worth by the researchers and the participants in the community.
ii. **Enjoyment**: Since project team members share and learn together in a collegiate spirit in the start-up, midway and at the end of the program, the whole program is considered to have brought some excitement to all participants involved.

iii. **Freedom**: Project teams are free to select specific activities relevant to the goals of the program. The structure of the learning program through action research encourages creativity and innovation throughout.

iv. **Sense of belonging**: Team members form alliance and networks. They are united by shared goals, and same paradigm of learning and research, therefore it develops a sense of belonging to the entire participants in the program.

**AN APPLICATION OF ACTION RESEARCH**

An example of action research in Malaysian context that could be used for discussion in this paper is based on the work of Sulaiman and Ahmad Fuad (1993). This research was funded by the Centre for Integrated Rural Development in Asia and Pacific (CIRDAP), a regional non-government organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The research was conducted in four villages of the extension areas of the then University Pertanian Malaysia (UPM) in two years from 1991 to 1992. The villages were Kampung Bukit Changgang and Kampung Sungai Buah in Selangor, and Kampung Batu 9 and Kampung Jijan in Negeri Sembilan.

Inherent in the project objectives was for the project to empower the villagers to take initiatives to plan for their own development, based on continuous community-based learning. The project proceeded taking into consideration the principle of sustainable development. The development model of the village, by advocating the action research principle, is shown in Appendix A.

Some of the outcomes of the village-based projects reported are as follows:

1. Kampung Batu 9: The development of Ferro-cement water tank to provide water for commercial group farming on guava planting. The success of the group project induced other villagers to venture into other initiatives such as aquaculture and banana planting. This had profound effect on the rate of credit repayment to the local Farmers’ Organization Authority, the source of credits for farmers.

2. Kampung Jijan: The development of women cooperative as a vehicle to diversify group members’ income through the mobilization of locally available resources especially in the making of light foods.

3. Sungai Buah: The implementation of livestock project (example, rabbit rearing). However, the project did not materialize because cooperation with the local development agency on the marketing of the product was hampered due to less clarity in terms of understanding of the purpose and needs of the project among the people involved. Nevertheless, the community and the organizer of the project learnt that the success of any community development should be based on the villagers’ problems, interests and capabilities.

4. Kampung Bukit Changgang: This was a youth settlement scheme, with majority of families was in their early forties and has young children. The women group won the award for the most progressive farmwomen group for the state of Selangor in 1992. In addition, there were men involved in sheep rearing and they had accumulated a significant trust fund for community welfare activities.

**POTENTIAL FOR THE FACULTY OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES IN ACTION RESEARCH**

The Faculty of Educational Studies (FES) of University Putra Malaysia has a lot to offer through action research. Familiar projects that could be considered as action research are: 1) K-Family Project, which is in collaboration with the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Education started in the year 2002. ii) Smart School Program based on the concept of “adopted school” through which there is a symbiotic relationship between FES and the school (community), in which the former conducts research while doing its educational function, and the latter gains knowledge and expertise for its growth.

Other benefit of action research between FES and the community is to bridge the gap between university and the people so that university is becoming an accessible ivory tower. Therefore, action research enables university to strengthen its function in fulfilling social responsibilities to community and its larger society.
Other benefits that FES should gain through action research are that it becomes an avenue for researchers to get inputs for publication purposes involving real knowledge about the community. Examples of issues for publications are as follows:

i. The initiation process of the project: This refers to the initial reflective analysis on current situations and present actions going on in the community.

ii. Monitoring or process evaluation of the project: The focus is on how plans of actions and actions are continuously and critically reflected upon in establishing suitable measurements and interventions for the problem-based research.

iii. Participatory approach in educating the community: The highlight is on the participatory feature of action research, where close connections between researcher and community members are required in order to ensure the success of such research.

iv. Action research: a university-community interface, etc.: This is to suggest action research as one of the channels to draw close connections between universities and community in promoting community development.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion shows that action research could be taken as one of the ways for the researchers in the field of education and other social sciences to diversify in their research approach. This is because action research has the purpose of educating the community due to its very nature that is participatory and collaborative between the researchers and the subject of research (community). Based on the concept of research management where there should be a “win-win situation”, action research, indeed, offers such benefits that no other research approach has that comparable advantage to both researchers and the researched.

REFERENCES


Appendix A: Development Stages of the Model Village in Action Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unorganized Stages</th>
<th>Organized Stages</th>
<th>Sustained, Self-Managed Communities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. members are individualistic</td>
<td>1. have an organization with vision, mission, clear set programs</td>
<td>1. are aware of the problems and the situation of the community and react to them positively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. unaware of the common problems</td>
<td>2. have set of leaders with democratic values, and skills</td>
<td>2. have a continuing education program or opportunities</td>
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<td>3. indifferent to</td>
<td>3. members are learning new skills and knowledge</td>
<td>3. can manage their conflicts and differences</td>
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<td>4. unable to resolve conflicts</td>
<td>4. learning about the problems of community</td>
<td>4. have strong linkages with other groups or government and other agencies</td>
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<td>5. factions</td>
<td>5. have plans how to solve the problems</td>
<td>5. leaders have learned skills, attitudes, and have a strong organization</td>
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<td>6. absence of services</td>
<td>6. in the process of setting up socio-economic projects</td>
<td>6. have a track record of achievement</td>
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<td>7. no linkages</td>
<td>7. the people have positive values (open, analytical, democratic)</td>
<td>7. can mobilize resources from within and outside</td>
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<td>8. low political awareness</td>
<td>8. participate actively in the activities in the community</td>
<td>8. have community assets, and built up and managed by the community</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. development activities non-sustainable</td>
<td>9. begin to develop alternative thinking and views</td>
<td>9. there are existing social services such water road, health, transport, education, housing, etc</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. begin to form links</td>
<td>10. aware and practice positive environmental actions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. members are politically aware</td>
<td>11. women have equal rights and privileges and participated in the community</td>
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<td>12. members are conscious of sustainable development</td>
<td>12. have a unique quality</td>
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<td>13. affect higher decision</td>
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<td>14. members are politically mature</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15. leaders are politically committed to sustainable development</td>
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Source: Sulaiman and Ahmad Fuad (1993)