



Living the Questions:  
Practitioner Action Research  
2008-2009

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# Introduction

## Getting Started with Practitioner Action Research:

### Practitioner Action Research

#### What is Practitioner Action Research (PAR)?

You don't need Aladdin's Lamp to improve your program. Instead, try Practitioner Action Research, a reflective process of progressive problem-solving that addresses issues and answers questions. It involves practitioners, in a community of learners, in deciding their OWN questions and working collaboratively to find ways to improve their practice and programs.

According to B. Allan Quigley<sup>1</sup>, action research is defined as, "A type of research in which educators, often with stakeholders and other professionals, examine their own practice, take specific actions to improve practice, and interpret the results. In action research, people systematically analyze a problem, review the literature and relevant experience, set a baseline for purposes of comparative analysis, systematically gather evidence on the observed change(s), and collectively reflect on the outcomes." <sup>2</sup> Quigley also once called it, quite simply, "Satisfying the itch."

For our purposes, we will consider four main phases:

- Question-Posing
- Planning
- Observing the Intervention
- Reflecting

#### What Action Research is NOT:

1. It is not the usual things teachers do when they think about their teaching. Practitioner Action Research is systematic and involves collecting evidence and rigorous reflection.
2. It is not just problem-solving. It involves problem- or question-posing and is motivated by a quest to improve and understand.
3. It is not the scientific method applied to teaching. While it poses questions, devises interventions to improve, and uses data to

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<sup>1</sup> Quigley, B.A. (1999). *Pennsylvania action research handbook and project planner*. Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education and the Pennsylvania State University. (Served as the base for this handbook)

<sup>2</sup> Quigley, B. A. (2006). *Building professional pride in literacy: A dialogical guide to professional development (Professional practices in adult education and lifelong learning.)* Melbourne, FL: Krieger Publishing Co. (P. 171).

inform, it is concerned about changing situations, not just interpreting them. It changes both the researcher and the situation.

### **Step 1: Question-Posing**

#### **The Question Area**

Begin by reflecting on practice and think about problems, issues, questions, or concerns you might have. Look at your extant data. Data can be from state or local reports based on Performance Standards. Data can also be your demographics, or observations or questions that you have about your program's quality, students' concerns or progress toward goals, case studies. To begin, you may just start with an "itch" or "wondering." Starting points for your "wonderings" can be guided by the following:

- "I am curious about..."
- "I would like to improve..."
- "I don't understand why..."
- "... is a continuing source of irritation."
- "Some people are unhappy about..."

Think about these for a minute. Using the information you have gathered, start to focus on an area...

#### **"Question Posing"**

##### ***Analysis***

What is happening now? What is this a question area? Why is this an area for program improvement? How do we know it's a problem? After discussion, write the question areas you might investigate.

Next, think deeply. What are the real underlying reasons for this question and need for program improvement?

You may want to discuss the following questions with your PIT to help decide on an area to investigate. Remember that PAR is a natural part of practice and teaching. It holds that effective practice and teaching are informed by personal knowledge, trial and error, reflection on practice, and conversations with colleagues. As you form your question area, think about these:

***Commitment***

- "Is this a question we want to spend time on?"
- "Are there other more pressing issues that need our attention?"
- "Will others agree to help?"

***Feasibility***

- "Is it possible to create one or more interventions (specific actions) to address the question?"
- "Will we be able to implement the interventions? Is it do-able?"

***Management***

- "Will we be able to manage and observe the intervention?"
- "Will we be able to complete it in the program year to see results?"

***Prior Research***

- "Are there other studies on this issue?" "What does the literature/research say about this?"

- “Have other programs experienced the same as I?”

You may want to check the Pennsylvania Family Literacy website at [www.pafamilyliteracy.org](http://www.pafamilyliteracy.org) to see the projects that family literacy programs researched last year. You may also check “Learning from Practice” section on the ABLE website to learn what other adult educators have done previously ([www.able.state.pa.us/ableresource](http://www.able.state.pa.us/ableresource))

Do NOT tackle questions that you can’t do anything about or over which you have no control.

### **Step 2: Planning the Intervention(s)**

Now that you’ve decided on a question area and know that it is important, do-able, and worth the effort, it’s time to think of ways to address the question in order to improve your program. First, decide who should be on your team.

#### **The Program Improvement Team (PIT)**

Identify administrators, teachers, collaborators, and adult students to serve on your team. The PIT may change as the question is identified and the intervention is implemented. Keep in mind that sometimes it’s good to have someone outside the “topic” on your team for fresh eyes. For example, if the question/problem is about adult learning gains, it may still be effective to have an early childhood partner on your team.

Ask yourself:

- “Who should be on my PIT? Why?”
- “Who else might assist?”

My potential team will consist of the following (name and position):

## Conceptualizing the Intervention

With your PIT, discuss the following:

- What interventions or specific actions might we use to resolve the question? (Brainstorm all possibilities; later eliminate those that cannot meet the criteria for ***Commitment, Feasibility, Management***).
- What are possible implications or side effects for these interventions? (e.g. Your question might be how to increase enrollment, but the groups you target may create other problems, for example, getting enough hours for retention.)
- What resources will we need? (human or other)
- How do we involve the learners in PAR? How do we get their buy-in to try our plan?

## Developing the Measures

- What is the baseline? If you want to have a sense of "better," you need to know where you started. Better than "what?" The baseline is the "what?" (e.g. enrollment from previous year, attendance in early fall, adult or child scores from previous year)
- What are our goals? How will we know if we reached them? What are my criteria for success? (e.g. increase in enrollment to meet standard, retention increase of 20%, score gain of 10%)

- What is the time frame? When shall we begin? End?
- What constraints in data collection might we encounter? What can we do about them?
- What methods will we use to collect data to tell us if it worked? How will we observe and document action and change? See Appendix for suggested methods of collecting data. Plan to use at least three methods for “triangulation” of data. (e.g. hard data, observation, pre and post videos, focus groups). Here are some tips from Madison Metropolitan School District, Madison, Wisconsin.

*“The 5W’s and an H”*

- WHY are we collecting these data? (What are we hoping to learn? Is there a match between what we hope to learn and the data?)
- WHAT exactly are we collecting? (What different sources will allow us to learn best? What previous data can we use? How much data do we need to learn if we were successful?)
- WHERE are we going to collect the data and for how long? (Are there any limitations? What support systems do we need to collect data?)
- WHEN are we going to collect the data and for how long? (Will we collect data at several points? Are there strategies we can use to observe during class? How will we make the time for data collection?)
- WHO is going to collect the data? (Are there data that can be generated by the students? Is there a colleague who can be an impartial observer or help to collect data?)
- HOW will data be collected and displayed? (What is the plan for analyzing the data? Reflecting on the results? Who will create the poster show? Who will write the monograph?)



### **Step 3: Observing the Intervention**

- Start your intervention plan.
- Collect data and analyze. Reflect at monthly meetings.
- Change or add interventions if it doesn't seem that you are getting the results you want. (PAR is cyclical and evolving, so feel free to adjust as you go.)
- Bring in another person to your PIT, if necessary.
- Collect more data. Check progress.
- Monitor and evaluate the changes that occur and judge the quality of the changes. Note these.
- Document along the way. Keep journals. Keep all records.
- Decide when to stop collecting data and begin analyzing your data and reflecting on what it means.
- Keep these questions in mind as your work through your project:
  - Am I staying true to the initial plan? If not, why?
  - Am I collecting the data I said I would?
  - Am I keeping track of changes as we work through the project?
  - Is my PIT monitoring progress through regular meetings and meaningful conversations about our research project?

#### **Step 4: The Reflection**

Look at the data with your PIT. It's not enough to say, "It seems to be better." Studying the data and figuring out what they mean is the most important step. Use these questions to guide your reflection.

- What do the data tell us? What were the results?
- Did our intervention(s) make a measurable difference?
- If so, did we meet/exceed our criteria for success?
- If not, how far were we from attaining them? What could we have done differently?
- What do these results mean? Did the changes accurately reflect what happened? Did something else happen to affect the outcomes?
- What will we continue to use in our program?
- What can we change to make this idea even better?
- What was less helpful that we can discard?
- How can we repeat this (or have others repeat it) to develop more validity for this intervention?
- What lessons should we share with the field?

## **Sharing Your Results-- Poster Show**

We expect each program to create a poster show display that highlights its SEQUAL PAR project and results. Be creative! Use photos, documents, videos to showcase your work. This will be shared with other programs. Also, use it to share with collaborators, policy makers, new enrollees, etc. This poster serves as an "outline" for the monograph.

At minimum, the poster should include the following items:

- Your program and PIT
- Your question and why it was an area for program improvement
- The IPQ(s), Performance Standard(s), and/or "wonderings" that informed it
- Your intervention(s)
- Your methods for data collection
- Your results
- Your interpretation or analysis of the results
- Lessons you learned to be shared with the field

For practical advice on creating a poster show, see:

<http://personal.psu.edu/drs18/postershow>

## **Sharing Your Results--Monograph**

Final monographs will be posted according to topic area on the Pennsylvania Family Literacy website. They will, therefore, be accessible to anyone who visits the site. So that the monographs are consistent and complete, use the following guidance.

GENERAL: Use 12-point font in Times New Roman or Arial. Include page numbers. Save as Word document. Single space.

Title Page

- Your question
- Name of Family Literacy Program
- PIT member names
- Date of monograph
- Contact email (if someone wants more information)

Abstract (1/2 page): Summary, very brief

- Question statement
- Baseline and Goal
- Intervention
- Methods of data collecting
- Results

Question Posing Stage (1/2-1 page):

- The topic area and question
- Data that informed the topic area (Performance Standards, IPQs, and others)
- Background to the problem

Planning (1 page):

- Members and positions of your PIT
- Intervention(s)
- Baseline
- Criteria for success
- Start and finish time
- Data sources
- Research that supports the issue and/or intervention

Intervention (1/4-1/2 page):

- Who, what, when?
- Problems encountered, if any
- Changes made in the course of the action (intervention or data)
- Beginning and end date

Results and Reflection (1-2 pages):

- Summary of data and results (Met criteria for success?)
- Interpretation and analysis of what it means
- Success or failure and why
- Impact on your program, your staff, your students
- What would you do the same or differently?
- Plans for future

Lessons to be shared with the field

Appendix: Could include:

- Questionnaires
- Focus group or interview questions
- Surveys, forms, etc. that you created
- Bibliography of your research resources
- Anything that would be useful to others

## APPENDIX A METHODS FOR COLLECTING DATA

Try to have at least three methods for reliability (triangulation). Here are some suggestions.

***E-data results:*** These correspond to your question/problem and the Performance Standards you were investigating. These would include, therefore, enrollment, retention hours, and educational gains for adults, GED, placement and retention in unsubsidized employment, etc.

***Interviews or focus groups:*** These allow for interaction of the researcher with others. There are three categories:

Structured: Useful when seeking specific information on a specific topic, with little room for discussion. (“How many times last week did you do homework at home?”)

Semi-structured: Involves asking more open ended questions, but allows the interviewee to go a bit further or provides some ideas they might not have thought about, using “probes.” (“How did you learn about the program?” [Probes: friend, flyers, media]).

Open: Encourages more open discussion and room for wide-ranging opinions. (“In what ways has the program helped you grow as a learner?”)

***Questionnaires:*** Like the interviews/focus groups, questionnaires can be closed or open.

Closed: Likert Scale, multiple choice, short response, seeking specific information. Little room for interpretation

Open: Asks for opinions with respondent providing their own words. Can be difficult to analyze.

***Document Analysis:*** Look at your and/or your participants’ records, written reports, in-take forms, letters, memos, journal entries, portfolios, writings. Analysis of these can also provide a baseline or inspiration for an intervention.

**Anecdotal Records:** Written descriptive accounts of incidents, which are especially valuable for documenting classroom activity and behavior and are helpful in noting patterns.

**Field Notes:** Similar to anecdotal records, but also include the researcher's impressions and interpretations at the same time. Written on location.

**Case Studies:** A data collection method in which a single person, entity, or phenomenon is studied in depth over a sustained period of time and through a variety of data. The purpose of a case study "is to gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each case of interest" (Patton, 1990, p. 384).

**Logs:** Careful records of recurring activities. Often numerical (e.g. attendance, time off task, computer use.) Commentary with the logs can be useful observational data.

**Journals:** Researchers keep reflections of the research process, which allow time to express feelings, anxieties, and ideas about the goings on. Journals are very useful at the reflection stage.

**Portfolio:** A collection of relevant materials compiled for a purpose.. Photos, papers, grades, minutes—anything relevant should be kept.

**Audio and Video Recordings:** Valuable for getting an exact record. Require permission.