

## **Action research for teaching improvement, Quality assurance and professional development**

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*One of the most fundamental concerns of post-secondary education is to improve teaching and assure quality through the promotion of research. The present reflective piece is an attempt to shed light on the commendable merit of action research in achieving such aim. Traditionally, research in social sciences relied on experiences, notes, and efforts made by outside experts. Action research, however, aims at changing and improving instructional situations. It fosters the community of practice to become more collaboratively reflective, analytical, and critical of their own actions and hence more professionally developed. In all, it advocates social, democratic change of individuals and communities as well as their well-being.*

*L'une des préoccupations majeures de l'éducation supérieure en Algérie est de promouvoir la recherche dans le but d'assurer la qualité et améliorer l'enseignement. Le présent article tente de porter des éclaircissements sur les mérites louables de la recherche action pour atteindre ce but. Traditionnellement, la recherche dans les sciences humaines dépendait des expériences, des remarques et des efforts de tiers experts. La recherche action, par contre, vise à changer et améliorer les situations d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. Elle favorise et encourage tous les groupes à devenir plus collaboratifs, réfléchis, analytiques et enclins à critiquer leurs actions et donc à devenir plus développés professionnellement. Désormais, elle préconise non seulement le changement social et démocratique des individus et des communautés mais aussi leur bien-être.*

### **Introduction**

It is well-known that the two major aims of Algerian post-secondary institutions are to ensure knowledge and prepare students for work, life, and citizenship. It has always been assumed that at university, an obtained degree

implies a highly accomplished learning. Nevertheless, evaluation should not focus solely on summative assessment but on quality as well.

Assuring quality in Algerian universities depends on a certain number of determining factors among which the educational policy of higher authorities (the government), the institutional vision (the university), individual teachers' philosophy and students' ability and motivation. It is, in fact, a process of change that goes through a series of challenges, and draws upon shared beliefs or values (culture) of all agents within a work environment (climate). At university level, the theoretical framework presupposes the existence of a strategic planning including not only what will be done but also how it will be done. The agents of change i.e., teachers, and learners have to change their ideas about how teachers teach and students learn. All of them need to show full commitment and involvement, take up everyday challenges, and work collaboratively.

Actually, teaching and learning opportunities provided by higher education in Algeria should be implemented through a strategic and collaborative action research aiming at promoting quality within the confines of the university. Students will, therefore, develop independently, study in depth, and think analytically, critically, and creatively. Collaborative action research instills in teachers a sense of commitment to instruction improvement, helps them glean worthwhile insights into classroom practice, and promotes decision-making when facing problems.

## **1. Theoretical Underpinnings**

Since 2003, new teaching paradigms and nomenclatures have been implemented to render Algerian tertiary education more efficient and more adequate to instructional and societal aspirations. From this socio-cultural standpoint, this reflective piece examines the intricate relationship between the efforts to be made by teaching staff in assuring quality and improving teaching through well-defined and reflective approaches to collaborative practitioner based research.

In his book entitled *'The Foundations of Social Research'* (1998), Michael Crotty contended that research at the tertiary level relies upon adequate underpinning philosophies and supporting theories. He added that any research framework must be built upon four basic interdependent constituents as shown in Figure 1:

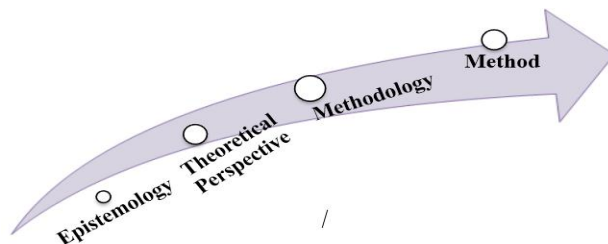


Figure 1: Scaffolding Research Process (Adapted from Crotty, 1998)

### 1.1 Epistemology

Derived from the Greek “*epistēmē*”, meaning knowledge or understanding, this term refers to a branch of philosophy that studies knowledge and justified belief. It can even be considered as the theory of knowledge which deals with its nature, sources, structure and limits. Epistemologists are more concerned by knowledge of propositions and the way it is justified as true belief. When a person does not believe in a proposition, he will not justify it as true. Thus, three main conditions are necessary for knowledge: truth, belief, and justification. A belief or a claim must be justified by using evidence. This evidence has to be of good quality, logical and reasonable. Guesses, conjectures and opinions are not classified as justified true belief.

In the present context, the perspective addresses a non-positivist socio-constructivist view of the world where students construct knowledge and more precisely meaning through social contact with each other. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator who focuses upon cooperation and collaboration rather than an imparter of knowledge. The notion of constructivism, a basic principle of the Competency-Based Approach to Language Teaching (CBLT), means that the learner builds his own knowledge. It is totally different from the traditional transmission model which considers knowledge as something external that can be passed from one person to another. Rather, the learner constructs it from the encountered experiences and constructs knowledge and meaning in accordance with their prior experiences within a given social context. Accordingly, one correct way to solve a problem does not exist and a solution to a problem is said to be viable if the individual focuses on the use of their own solution and according to a certain criteria. (von Glasersfeld, 1995)

A second major learning theory aiming at assuring quality and improving teaching is enactivism. According to Davies, Sumara and Kieren (1996), an individual is part of a complex holistic environment made up of interrelated

aspects in the same way as a web. The notion of connectedness tallies with the university environment in which all facets of the student's life are taken into consideration. The enactivist theory, according to the same authors, is an ecological perspective which sees learning as "a participation in the world, a co-evolution of knower and known that transforms both" (p. 64). Thereby, teaching improvement must not be based on the assumption that all students are able to learn the same thing at the same time without taking into consideration the learners' experiences. Assuring the quality of Learning for Davies et al (1996) includes all aspects of the student's life and not simply an intended choice made by the teacher in order to involve a certain targeted behavior.

## **1.2 Theoretical perspective**

The second constituent of Crotty's model is defined as "the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria." (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). From the epistemological vision, the enactivist model of knowledge and learning fits well with a theoretical perspective known as phenomenology. As its name implies, phenomenology "is not a doctrine, nor a philosophical school, but rather a style of thought, a method, an open and ever-renewed experience having different results." (Begg, 2000, p. 1). It is the study of phenomena and the way people consciously experience the world. These phenomena are viewed "as inseparable from the context in which they exist and the person that observes them." (p. 4). From this phenomenological perspective, the aim of a researcher, then, is to comprehend, interpret and reflect on these experiences (lived meanings) that are depicted via language as a central means of communication. According to van Manen (1990) people's lived experiences will make them more resourceful and thoughtful. Such belief reinforces the design of action research which claims to improve practice through reflection. It relies on the students and researchers' engagement to explore and reflect the world through their own experiences. Reflection as a major concept of hermeneutic phenomenology is always retrospective relating to already lived experiences. The teacher researcher checks over these experiences in order to understand and reflect on their meaning. The results are presented in the form of a phenomenological text which attempts to "capture life experience (action or event) in anecdote or story because the logic of story is precisely that story retrieves what is unique, particular or irreplaceable." (Van Manen, 1990, p. 152)

### 1.3 Methodology

As a third inherent aspect of the scaffolding research process, methodology concerns the research design that includes the plan of action or strategy chosen by the researcher. It is a rationale on which this latter will use specific methods and link them to the final results. (Crotty, 1998)

In a research paper entitled 'Action Research and Minority Problems' in 1946, the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin coined the term Action Research. He was the founder of applied, and social psychology and studied group dynamics and organizational development. Lewin described action research as 'proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action.' (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1990, p. 8) In the early 50s, Stephen Corey introduced Lewin's model into education in the United States of America. Stenhouse (1975) contended that during the 70s and 80s, action research appeared with the Humanities Curriculum Project in the United Kingdom. Later on, a lot of debates were held by a large number of researchers (Grundy, 1982; Whitehead, 1982, Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1990; Elliott, 1991; McNiff, 2002) who made notable contributions and suggested many valuable approaches.

It is very important to mention that action research contradicts the positivist vision which considers that the credibility of research relies upon objectivity and value-freedom. Knowledge through action research is generated in order to promote social, democratic change of individuals and communities as well as their well-being. It is, in fact, a living educational theory and its aspects coincide with those of the lived experiences of individuals that are adopted by hermeneutic phenomenology and the enactivist theory. Researchers always intend to improve their practice. They see the gap that may exist between the actual teaching situation and the ideal one. It behoves them to identify a problematic situation. By problematic, it is not meant that the teachers' practice inside the classroom is ineffective or that they lack competence. Instead, it refers to the whole cluster of questions and doubts about practice. Such problematic situation necessitates a deliberate intervention aiming at bringing about some changes and improvements. This intervention relies upon a systematic collection of data and information rather than on mere presuppositions or inklings.

Action research in education is a process through which a teacher researcher investigates both teaching and learning in order to improve his own practice as well as students' learning. Carr and Kemmis (1986) defined action research as a "self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in order to improve the rationality of justice of their own social and educational practices as well as

their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out.” (p. 220)

The long-standing and still widely held belief is that participants i.e., teacher and students are members of the research community. The teacher becomes a researcher who reflects on his practice and explores the whole context through systematic and critical approach and investigation. New ideas and alternatives are then developed. Burns (2010) observed that the ownership of change is invested in those who conduct the research. Nevertheless, she informs that the aim of action research is not very simple and based on an identified pattern in order to solve a problem inside a classroom. The possibilities and contributions of action research are rather manifold. Its major aims with shared aspects as suggested by Edge (2001) are summed up in Figure 2.

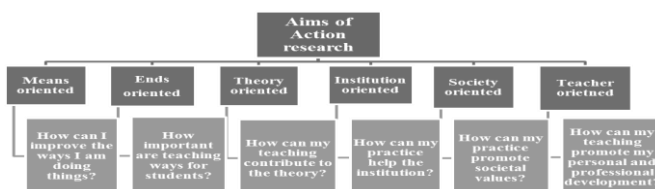


Figure 2: Action Research Aims (Adapted from Edge, 2001, p. 5)

It is quite obvious that teaching in general is laborious and most teachers find it a real pain. Many would argue that doing research in addition to teaching is far from being a simple duty. It takes time and is effort demanding. Research is not their business at all as they are snowed under with full teaching loads and refuse to brood over theorizing, questioning, collecting and analyzing data. A classroom reality, they think, does not match teaching theories. Teachers are actually doing action research when they plan their lessons differently, constantly assess students, discuss in staff meetings learners' misbehavior, and their utter despondency, and look for alternative teaching strategies and techniques. They may be interested in their personal and professional development and hence formalize action research in order to “reach their own solutions and conclusions and this is far more attractive and has more impact than being presented with ideals which cannot be attained.” (Burns, 2010, p. 7)

Formalizing a whole research process goes through systematic planning, acting and evaluating, three main steps that help teacher researchers try out various ways of doing things until they find out the most appropriate and efficacious teaching and learning situation. Formalization also implies that action research is:

- Specific to one teaching situation and can never be applied for all other situations.
- Participatory and collaborative. All participants, teacher researcher(s), students, colleagues, and school / university administrators, have a hand and get involved in what is done.
- Self-evaluation ongoing process. The teacher researcher reflects on and evaluates the action in order to improve the situation.
- An opportunity for the researcher to develop his professional knowledge, take control and make changes.

Being a practical methodology, action research considers the classroom as a dynamic system where meanings are shared by both the teacher and students. It allows them to question existing practices and then try to modify them in order to find out viable ways of improving such practices. The first phase concerns planning through which an issue is identified, a question is formulated, and a plan of action is developed. It is then followed by action which consists of a set of well-elaborated and systematic interventions over a given period of time. During the third phase, the teacher researcher observes the outcomes of the action, collects data and information about what has been happening using a wide variety of data collection methods such as observation, journals, interviews, and questionnaires. The researcher has to render the study more credible, systematic, and focuses on providing evidence to all what has been done. The last phase deals with evaluating and reflecting on the results of what has been explored. It is an empowering phase because it does not only bring out noticeable changes in teaching, and relationships with others but improve the teacher's personal and professional development. The findings as well as the reflections may incite the researcher to decide on further cycles in order to amend and better the classroom practice.

Reflection on teaching, according to Schön (1983), is either reflection-in-action or reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action is "reflection on one's spontaneous ways of thinking and acting, undertaken in the midst of action to guide further action." (p. 22) Reflection-on-action, however, comes after what happened in the classroom. In fact, reflective teachers operate differently from routine teachers who "as technicians narrowly construe the nature of the problems confronting them and merely carry out what others, removed from the classroom, want them to do." (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4) Reflective teachers,

however, are inclined to find responses to three main questions: What do I do? How do I do it? What does this mean for me and those I work with? They use a wide range of strategies such as collaborative action research investigations, journals, narratives, teacher dialogues, and discussion groups.

As Reason and Torbert (2001) noted, “action researchers work on the epistemological assumption that the purpose of academic research and discourse is not just to describe, understand and explain the world but also to change it.” (as cited in Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 7) Mc Niff, (1988), and Burns, (2010) argue that a flexible action research approach relies upon the researcher’s spontaneity, creativity, personal ideas and theories. Burns (2010) emphasized the fact that an action research process includes several aspects that are not inevitably fixed in only one direction. The researcher is more concerned by exploring, identifying, planning, collecting information, analyzing and reflecting, hypothesizing and speculating, intervening, observing, reporting, writing, and presenting.

Coghlan and Brannick’s (2010) spiral model is one of the most popular action research models. It is made up of four related phases. (Figure 3) The whole research process will develop when successive cycles of planning, data gathering, acting and reviewing take place in accordance with four factors: context, quality of relationships, quality of the action research process itself, and the outcomes.

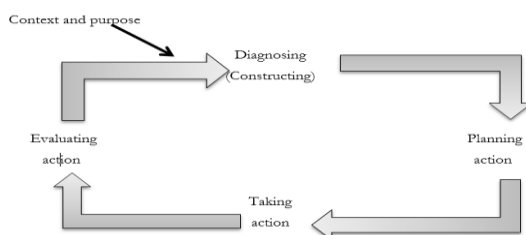


Figure 3: Action Research Cycle (Adapted from Coghlan & Brannick, 2010)

It is worthy to note that the core steps of the above action research model focus upon building emancipatory social relationships through democratic dialogue, enacting change, and constructing actionable knowledge. They were articulated by Coghlan and Brannick (2010) in the same way as Lewin’s (1946) original form:

- *Pre-step*: this includes understanding the context as well as identifying the internal and external goals of the research whether they are educational, cultural, social or even political and economic. Another



main component of this pre-step is engaging collaborative relationships between participants (teacher researcher, other teachers, and students). The main issues linked to the central theme of the study are diagnosed on the basis of a rationale.

- *Planning*: it takes place when the context, and the goal(s), are well identified and diagnosed. The researcher observes that something is not as it should be and/or could be improved. A topic (concern) is identified, and a working title is written down along with consistent explanations. Then an action plan is put forward considering not only the realities and constraints of the teaching situation but the potential improvements as well. (Burns, 2010) Coordination is very primordial at this stage. Discussions with other colleagues and students will ideally help the action researcher when ideas and details are talked through.
- *Action*: it encompasses the various ways of carrying out the plan and intervening deliberately over a period of time. The interventions are ‘critically informed’ i.e. the action researcher questions his “assumptions about the current situation and plan[s] new and alternative ways of doing things” (Burns, 2010, p. 8). It is obvious that things do not always go precisely as expected and the teacher researcher is not merely an observer of what is happening but works actively and makes certain deviations from the original plan if necessary.
- *Evaluation*: it concerns examining and making critical reflections on the intended and unintended outcomes of the action in order to understand and make sense of the topic (issue). Such evaluation can be done in isolation but in small groups is more preferable and beneficial. All participants have the opportunity to share ideas, findings, and even impressions in order to decide upon future changes and improvements. As it has been previously explained, a teacher researcher “may decide to do further cycles of AR to improve the situation even more or to share the story of ... research with others as part of ... ongoing professional development.” (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1990, p. 14)

The foundational characteristics of Coghlan and Brannick’s model take into consideration the fact that several cycles can take place concurrently. Some are short-term cycles which will contribute to the medium and longer term cycles. It is also very important to highlight the similarities between this model and

Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) Process model of L2 Motivation containing two main dimensions: Action Sequence and Motivational Influences. The first dimension is made up of three phases: pre-actional, actional, and post-actional. The pre-actional stage deals with setting determined goals which arise out of the students' desires, hopes, wishes, as well as learning opportunities. The goals are then transformed into intentions to act. Locke and Latham (1990) saw the goal as an engine to fire the action and provide the direction in which to act. It is the first concrete mental representation of a desired end state (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). An intention, however, entails commitment and actual resolutions to carry out the plan. Locke and Latham (1990) contended that "believing that a goal is desirable and reachable does not automatically force an individual to act. The individual must choose to put his or her judgment in action." (p. 127)

With the benefit of hindsight, the pre-step/pre-actional phase of the action research model applied in this study relies upon setting goals voluntarily. Rather than dictating and assigning tasks and learning goals on students, teachers comply with their wishes, and eventually make them more committed in order to manage and energize the action plan.

The action phase comprises three main processes. The first one concerns the way subtasks and activities are generated and implemented according to the action plan. The second process is appraisal. The action researcher makes links between students' participation in tasks and their effective learning and the various environmental stimuli. He evaluates their learning behavior in accordance with the physical and psychological contexts. Action control is the third main process. Dörnyei and Ottó (1998) referred to it as self-regulatory strategies that "protect concentration and directed effort in the face of personal and/or environmental distractions, and so aid learning and performance" (p. 16). Very often, the actors may face some issues when there is no action outcome. They will not eventually renounce their learning if their choice motivation is powerful. They would rather revise their goals, maintain or form new intentions, and modify strategies in order to achieve their goals.

Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) post-action phase is concerned with evaluating the action outcome whether the action is terminated or interrupted or whether the goals are achieved or not. Inferences are made for future actions on the basis of collected information. It is a thorough retrospective critical phase through which the teacher researcher and students evaluate their experiences, develop further strategies in order to start a new cycle with new wishes, goals, and intentions.

#### **1.4 Method**

The fourth and last interdependent constituent of Crotty's (1998) scaffolding research framework is method. He defined it as "the techniques or procedures

used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis” (p. 3). For him, the choice or identification of a given method in tight relation with the appropriate research methodology, theoretical perspective, and epistemology does not quite suffice. Carrying an interview, a participant observation, or any other method necessitates some kind of justification. The following table sums up the main data gathering methods at the disposal of university teachers interested in conducting an action research and prompted to assure quality in their teaching and in students’ learning as well.

Action Research Data Gathering Methods
1. Teachers and Students In-depth questionnaires
2. Classroom Structured Observation
3. Group interviews and Meetings
4. Teacher Researcher journal
5. Students’ journals

## Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the impact of action research within post-secondary institutions upon the professional development of the whole community of practice and the assurance of quality in students’ learning outcomes. Action research draws upon non-positivistic philosophy and theoretical perspective whereby participants have the opportunity to change and improve their practice. A well-defined policy of change based on awareness, collaborative consulting in terms of goals, action, full implementation, refinement, and evaluation would certainly render teaching and research practices more accountable as well as enhance academic standards and quality.

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