

How to...



Run action research

Do it yourself

www.nfer.ac.uk



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

This document is designed to be read with Adobe Acrobat



What are the challenges?

As with any research, action research is not without its challenges. However, these are surmountable. We outline some of the issues that education practitioners have told us about below, along with some solutions.

- **Finding time to do the research.** Be realistic about how much time you can give when you decide the scope of your research. It is better to do a small project well, than an over-ambitious one badly. Think about ways to incorporate collecting data into your lessons to streamline the process; for example, you could use test data as evidence or ask your learners to interview each other as part of a lesson. Also, try to involve other colleagues in your research, to share the load (and the benefits).



- **Getting senior leaders on board.** Action research involves trying new things and taking some (small) risks. Make sure that your Senior Leadership Team (SLT) supports this. Developing a mini proposal for the research can help. This could set out:
 - your research questions
 - how the project will benefit your school
 - a (realistic) timetable
 - the amount of staff time and any other resources you will need
 - how you will make sure the project is ethical
 - a risk assessment
 - You could also point your SLT towards NFER literature (www.nfer.ac.uk/ris) on the value of being a research-engaged school, to help to make your case.
- **Getting to grips with research methods.** As a practitioner, you use research skills every day: asking questions; reflecting on data and writing reports. NFER's Methods of Research web pages (www.nfer.ac.uk/ris) will help you to build on what you already know about research methods and processes.
- **Being objective.** It can be hard to stand back from the research when you collect and analyse the data, especially when this takes place within your own classroom or school. Actively looking for evidence

that goes against your own view is good practice and will help you to avoid biasing your results. This is also where having colleagues to help you with your research may help provide a different perspective.

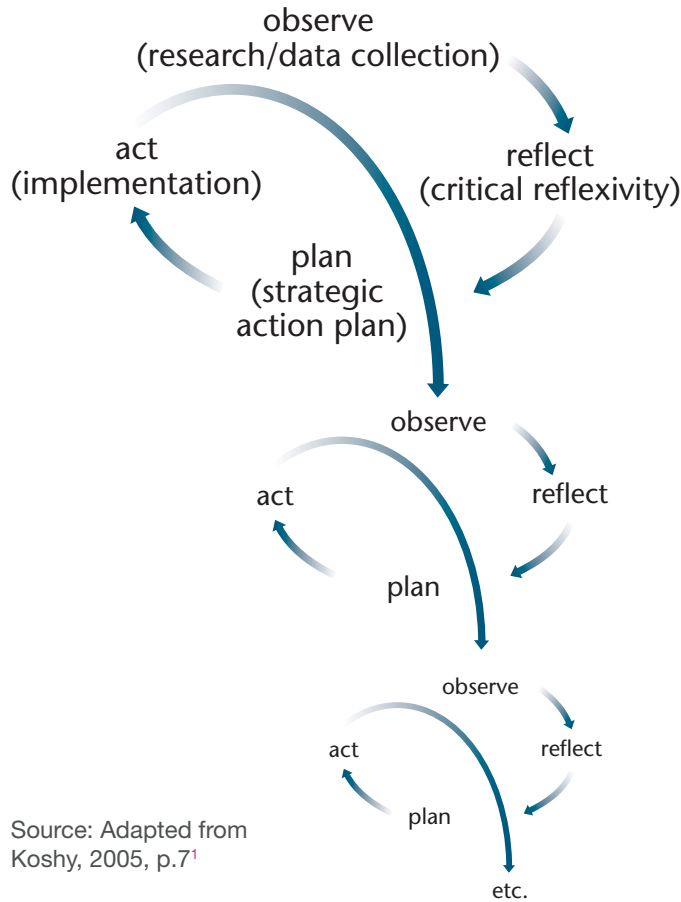
- **Handling negative results.** Some practitioners are disappointed when their research suggests that a new approach has not worked. However, a negative finding does *not* mean that your research has failed! In fact, this learning is really valuable, as it prevents you and your colleagues from wasting resources on an unsuccessful approach.
- **Handling positive results.** Even if your research shows that a new approach has had a positive effect, some practitioners may be reluctant to 'unlearn' their current practice. Engaging colleagues in the action research from the start (or in a future cycle) can help them to see the value of the research and of acting on its findings.



What does action research involve?

Action research involves a cycle of processes, which the diagram below sets out. In essence, an action researcher plans a change, implements it, observes what happens and then reflects on it. But it does not stop there. Having completed the one cycle of action research, an action researcher would then start another, planning a new change based on the learning from the first cycle. You can continue with your action research for as long as is useful and practical.

O'Leary's cycles of research



Source: Adapted from Koshy, 2005, p.7¹

Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes.

1 Koshy. V. (2005). Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.



How do I do action research?

Looking at each step in the action research cycle in turn (plan, act, observe, reflect), we outline the key activities you will need to carry out. You can find out more detail about these steps in our other guides for practitioners (www.nfer.ac.uk/ris).

1. Plan (the most crucial step!)

...your research	...the change you want to investigate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decide your research question. Good starting points include: known issues/weaknesses, consultation with colleagues/learners/parents/carers, and review of Management Information data. Design your research and choose your methods based on the nature of your research question. Decide how you will ensure your project is ethical. Check your school's data policies and identify whose consent you need to go ahead with the research. This may include senior leaders, colleagues, learners and parents/carers. Ask a colleague to act as a critical friend, reviewing your research as you go along. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For some research questions, you will need to plan the change you want to make – this might be a change to your practice, a different approach to part of your role, or using a different set of resources. Talking to colleagues and reading existing practice or research literature can help you to identify promising approaches to test out in your own school.
<p>...and don't forget to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get colleagues on board – tell them what you plan to do and why. Their engagement is key. Make a project plan, setting out when you will trial the intervention and collect, analyse and report on the data. Make sure your project is manageable within the amount of time you have! 	

2. Act:

- Put your plan into action!

3. Observe:

- Collect your data – collecting data from different sources is good practice (e.g. colleagues' views, learners' views and test data)
- Get participants' consent.

4. Reflect:

- Sort and analyse your data
- Be objective
- Reflect on what the data means and test your interpretation out on your critical friend and/or the people who participated in your research project.

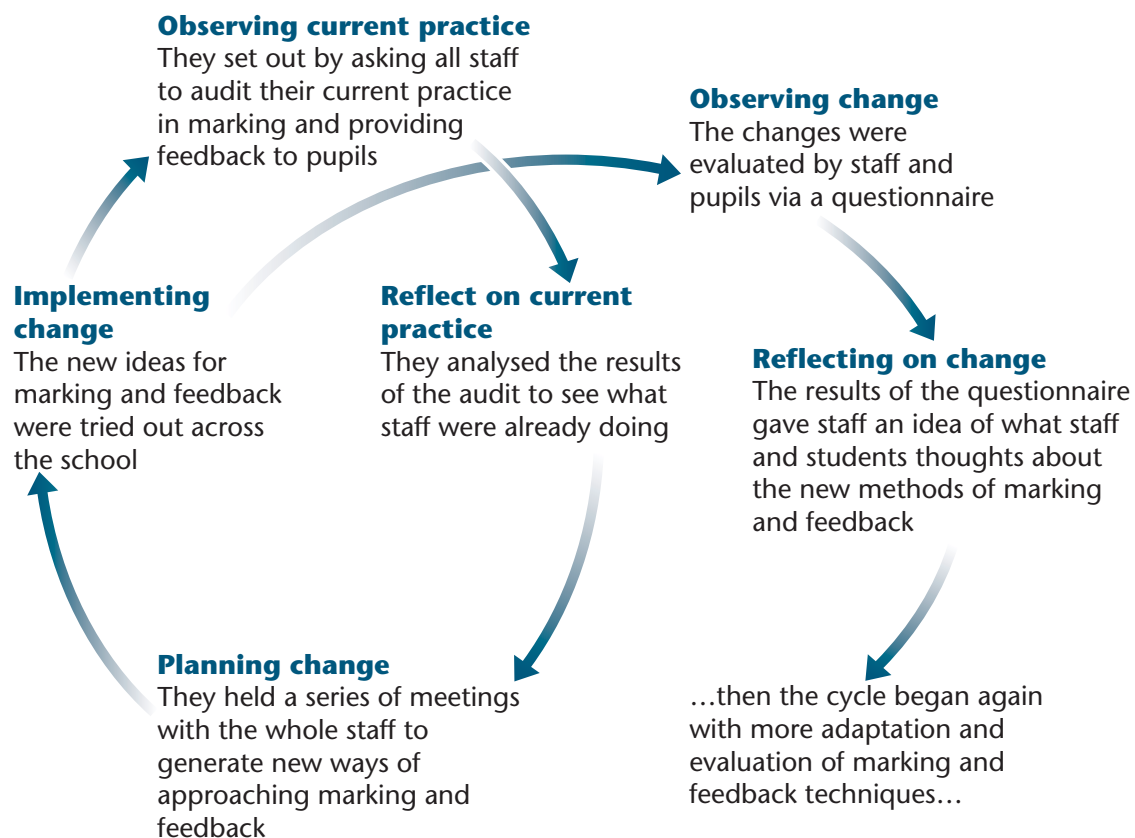
...and then repeat steps 1 to 4 again.



Case study: using action research to investigate ways to improve learners' writing

The diagram below describes how teachers from two merged primary schools investigated how different ways of marking and feedback could impact on learners' writing.

Action research cycle at a school



Research ideas

The list of topics you could research is almost endless. Here are some research questions that other action researchers in schools have investigated.

- What type of essay feedback is most useful to students?
- What are the benefits of working outside the traditional classroom for very young children?
- Do rewards contracts motivate A-level students?
- Does using interactive whiteboards help learners' writing?
- How can your school engage 'hard to reach' parents/ carers?
- What are the benefits and challenges of supporting young people to do their own research?



Sharing your research

Sharing your research is also an important element of action research.

This diagram highlights some of the reasons why this is the case.



- You**
Forces you to reflect on your findings, helping your interpretation of the data
- Participants**
Thank people for their time and contribution to your research
- Your school**
Provides learning for colleagues
Supports school improvement
- Education community**
Offers lessons to the wider education community, who can avoid what your research showed did not work well, and try out what worked well

Other useful resources

We hope that this short guide to action research has whetted your appetite for carrying out your own research. NFER has published a series of 'How to' guides for practitioners who want to carry out their own research, helping you put your ideas into practice. NFER have a book on action research, *Action research: making a difference in education*. Other books and training days are also available as well as free guidance on topics to research and methods of research. Why not get recognition for your achievements in research in your school, college or early years setting by applying for the NFER Research Mark? Visit www.nfer.ac.uk/ris for more information.

The NFER 'How to... Write up Your Research' guide has lots of ideas on how to present your findings in interesting ways and share it with others – www.nfer.ac.uk/ris

The material in this guide has been re-purposed from Riggall, A. (2009). 'Action research: what is it, who does it and why?' In: Lawson, A. (Ed) *Action Research: Making a Difference in Education* (Volume 1). Slough: NFER.

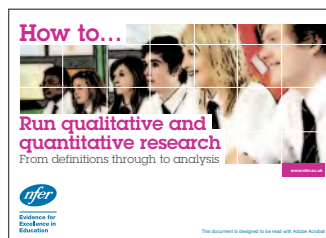
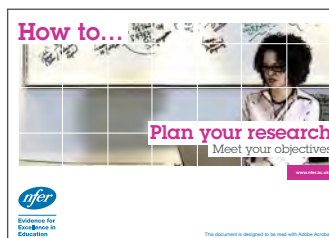
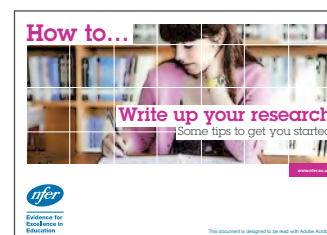
Run action research – do it yourself

'How to' Guides



The NFER 'How to' guides are a quick and easy way to digest different aspects of research.

Written by NFER researchers, these guides will help practitioners run research projects in education. From definitions and benefits, through to potential pitfalls, they will ensure the research is based on professional guidance.



© 2013 National Foundation for Educational Research

ISBN 978-1-908666-76-5

How to cite this publication: National Foundation for Educational Research (2013). *How to... Run action research: Do it yourself* (How to Guides). Slough: NFER.

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission of NFER.

National Foundation for Educational Research
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks, SL1 2DQ

T +44 (0)1753 637007
F +44 (0)1753 790114
E products@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

This guide was published in 2013 and was correct at the time of publication. Users are encouraged to check for the latest advice on data protection with the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation. For further information please visit the [ICO website](http://ico.org.uk).



● independent ● insights ● breadth ● connections ● outcomes