

Part-time Faculty Other

Course Research Action Research

From time to time issues arise in the course room that require faculty to develop new approaches to teaching and learning. Action research is an applied tool for the reflective instructor that offers a process of inquiry in which the primary basis for its use is to improve practice. Richard Sagor, founder of the Institute for the Study of Inquiry in Education based in Camas, Washington, suggests a seven-step process which he describes as "helping educators be more effective at what they care most about – their teaching and the development of their students."

The following steps, which can be used by a single faculty, by two colleagues, or by an entire department, are taken from Sagor's book, *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA. (2000, p. 3-7). Examples are taken from community colleges. The goal of action research is to frame a topic and use the steps in a series of as many cycles as needed in order to draw conclusions that affect professional practice.

The Action Research Process

1. **Select a focus.** Sagor encourages faculty to select an issue, problem, or topic to investigate that will be highly significant to teaching and learning with students. It should be, he says, worth doing because it "promises to make the central part of a teacher's work more successful and satisfying" (p. 4). You might want focus on teaching methods, types of assessment, student communication, and/or course room behaviors.
2. **Clarify theories.** Next, identify the values, beliefs, and theoretical perspectives that you hold related to your topic. If, for example, you are concerned about increasing small group interactions, you might want to investigate your values and the questioning strategies related to setting up student discussions.
3. **Identify research questions.** "Once the focus area is selected and your perspectives and beliefs have been clarified, the next step is to generate a set of personally meaningful research questions to guide the inquiry" (p. 4).
4. **Collect data.** Either you or a colleague can begin to answer the questions by observing and collecting data in your course room. Ensure that data are valid and reliable and "align with any unique characteristics of your course room" (p. 5). If, for example, you are operating within an online environment, you would want to ensure that the system supports student discussion. Sagor emphasizes use of triangulation to ensure that data produce reliable and valid findings. By this he means that "multiple independent sources of data are used to answer questions" (p. 5). Basically, this triangulation could use such things as tests, surveys, and homework to assess whether observed data correlated with other materials to produce reliable answers to questions.
5. **Analyze data.** For Sagor, two questions need to be answered in sorting out the data: *What is the story told by these data? Why did the story play itself out this way?* Answering these questions allows for development of a theory regarding what might be done to improve the situation.
6. **Reporting results.** Discussion of results with other colleagues or with students themselves adds to the collective wisdom related to teaching and learning. It may add new dimensions or resources for faculty who are at a loss as to how to solve a problem or issue in their own teaching.
7. **Take informed action.** Taking the next step may mean that the seven-step cycle is repeated with a more defined question, it may mean that practice is refined, or significantly changed. At any rate, the results ensure that teaching is not just trial and error, but are informed by research and best practices.