What is meant by action research in a teaching and learning context?

Kurt Lewin first used the term ‘action research’ to describe ‘research that will help the practitioner’ by providing clarity about how to make improvements to complex situations. He aimed to develop a system of analysing and evaluating action intended to investigate particular social problems.

Lewin (1946, p.34) suggested that by working systematically through a ‘circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action’, practitioners could obtain objective standards for achievement and so facilitate agreement as to the conclusions to be drawn.

The process of action research involves a series of linked enquiries. Teachers formulate questions which arise directly from their classroom experiences at each stage of the process.

The idea of action research in the field of UK education emerged in the context of school-based curriculum development in the 1960s. In John Elliott’s (1991, 1997) opinion, action research developed as a result of teachers in some innovative secondary modern schools attempt to restructure and reconceptualise the humanities curriculum and led to emerging ideas of teachers-as-researchers, teaching as reflexive practice and teaching as a form of enquiry.

The view of bottom-up curriculum work is further conceptualised and documented by academics like Lawrence Stenhouse (1968, 1976) and Jean Ruddick. Their interest lies in designing the curriculum so that it is more relevant to the lives of pupils and it involves transforming the instructional process from a transmission mode to a more interactive and discussion-based mode.

Based on their extensive experience of conducting action research in a number of different educational settings, Vivienne Baumfield, Elaine Hall and Kate Wall (2008, p.4) prefer to describe the process of teachers investigating questions which arise directly from their classroom experiences as ‘practitioner enquiry’, which occupies the middle ground between reflection and action research.