Action Research for Improved Classroom Teaching

Unit 1: Benefits of action research

Trainer notes

Overview

Aims and outcomes

Participants to:
• understand what is meant by action research in a teaching and learning context
• determine what counts as evidence in making decisions about teaching, learning and interactions in school
• decide what a preliminary action research cycle will look like and feel like as part of their role in school
• understand the potential benefits of undertaking action research for them and their pupils by experiencing an initial cycle.

Participants

The unit is intended to support senior leaders, members of a teaching and learning (or similar) group, middle leaders, and classroom practitioners. It has been written for participants who have particular specialisms within the organisation (eg. behaviour support, a specific key stage) as well as those who assume more generic roles.

Resources

• Laptop, projector and screen for showing presentation
• PowerPoint presentation for Unit 1
• Handouts 1.1-1.6
• Flipchart paper and marker pens for step 7

How it fits in with school improvement

Often in terms of pupil progress, the current culture of performativity in UK education requires that classroom practitioners be able to demonstrate the impact and evidence of approaches to learning and teaching. Following an initial introduction, this unit prepares participants for an initial action research cycle which focuses on a current area of their practice which they feel requires further exploration. In doing so, it prepares them for a wider exploration of the concepts of impact and evidence (and further research cycles) in later sessions.

Timing

90 minutes

Participants need enough time to have carried out the first action research cycle but not so long that they forget what they’re doing. Three weeks is a reasonable time between units.
Rationale and background

Action research occurs in cycles of plan, do, review. From this perspective, participants will draw on their prior knowledge of research before deciding what a preliminary action research cycle will look like and feel like as part of their school.

Before you present

- Insert the presenter’s name and the date of the training session on slide 2.
- Read through the PowerPoint presentation and consider how participants might respond to each of the activities as described in this document (each marked with the symbol: ⭐️). This will give you a feel for colleagues’ reactions and help you to plan for their individual needs.
- Ensure that you understand slide 8 and Handout 1.4.
- Ensure there are enough copies of handouts to go round.
- Display the three posters which make up Handout 1.1 on separate walls of the training room.
- Ensure that participants have access to sticky notes.
- Display the three sheets of flipchart paper on separate walls of the training room. Write one of the think pieces on slide 10 on each sheet before the session begins.
- Consider how you will make additional resources available to participants.

Step 1: Initial task (5 minutes)

⭐️ Show slide 1 as participants enter the room and encourage them to read the questions on each of the three posters.

Give support as necessary as they write their responses on sticky notes and fix them to the wall by the relevant question.

Monitor participants’ responses so you can make a summarising comment as part of step 3 (slide 5).

Step 2: Overviews (2 minutes)

Show slide 2 and explain that this unit is part of a course from Optimus Education on improving classroom teaching through action research. Introduce yourself.

Show slide 3 and explain that it includes an overview of the whole training course. The course has been developed around research cycles of plan, do, review. This means that the units have been written to connect and activate participants’ learning. There will always be a task to complete before the next unit. This is so that participants can have a go at planning short research cycles before reviewing and planning the next stage of their research in the subsequent unit.

- Explain that Unit 1 requires participants to draw on their prior knowledge of research before deciding what a preliminary action research cycle will look like and feel like as part of their role in school.
In Unit 2, participants will learn how to check out what has been researched previously. They will pose 6 research questions, consider ethical issues, and know how to locate and make sense of the impact of previous research.

Unit 3 marks a return to planning for a second research cycle, including understanding protocols around research methodology and identifying appropriate methods for collecting data in order to measure the impact of an intervention. Participants will be expected to carry out their research in preparation for Unit 4.

In Unit 4, participants will learn about how to disseminate findings. They will create a poster explaining how they set about their research. They will evaluate their own and each other’s research projects.

In Unit 5, participants will present their findings and consider how to embed new practice. They will also work out what they will do next with the research or consider if it throws up further questions.

Show slide 4 and explain that during today’s session, participants will evaluate aspects of their role in school in order to learn about the benefits of undertaking action research. They will have time to plan their first action research cycle and there is an expectation (the ‘Do’ part of the overview) that they will conduct their research in time for Unit 2.

Step 3: Progress marker (5 minutes)

Show slide 5 and distribute a copy of Handout 1.2 to each participant.

Explain that this is a progress marker for the learning objectives for this session. Ask participants to evaluate themselves against the criteria on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 signifies very little existing knowledge and/or skill, 10 signifies a large amount of knowledge and/or skill.

For early finishers, ask participants to justify why they have positioned themselves at a particular point on the scale.

Explain that we will review progress using this tool during the session.

Explain that now is probably a good point to summarise the responses participants wrote on the sticky notes in step 1 (slide 1). Give a summary of participants’ responses. Are there many similarities? Are there many differences? Which of the three contexts has the most sticky notes? Is there a reason for this?

Step 4: Determining impact of training (5 minutes)

Show slide 6 and explain that although the aim of the course is for participants to develop knowledge and skills about action research to be able to use it as a tool for improving classroom teaching, it would also be interesting to find out whether participants’ perceptions of research shift at all as a result of engaging with the training. Participants will return to these statements at the beginning of Unit 3 and at the end of Unit 5.
Distribute **Handout 1.3** and explain that it contains a series of statements.

- **🌟** Ask participants to take a couple of minutes to circle the three statements which mean the most to them at this stage of the training package.
- Explain that you will collate their responses and that you will not share your findings about participants’ responses with anyone outside the training room.
- Explain when you will share your findings and give your rationale for this.
- When two or three minutes are up, collect in **Handout 1.3**.

**Step 5: What is action research? (30 seconds)**

Show slide 7 and explain that the Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘action research’ as ‘studies carried out in the course of an activity or occupation, typically in the field of education, to improve the methods and approach of those involved’.

**Step 6: Action research in context (5 minutes)**

Show slide 8 and explain that academics have developed alternative definitions of action research. These definitions are mainly based on their experiences of working with teachers on questions which arise from their classroom practice.

- **🌟** Explain that you will describe some of the alternative views of action research held by Lewin, Elliott, Stenhouse and Baumfield, Hall and Wall (using **Handout 1.4**). You will give each description twice. Participants may not write while you are talking. After you have stopped talking, they may make some brief notes. Once they have heard all of the descriptions twice, you will ask them to summarise the views of Lewin, Elliott, Stenhouse and Baumfield, Hall and Wall.

  (This is an example of a Kagan (2001) co-operative learning strategy called Listen Write. Co-operative learning is an approach designed to include all learners in a reflective learning process.)

Show slide 9 and explain that drawing on their experiences of working with teachers, Baumfield, Hall and Wall (2008) have constructed a model which takes into account the interrelations between three key aspects: the intention of the research, the process by which the research is pursued, and the audience with which findings are shared.

**Step 7: Research in your school (5 minutes)**

Show slide 10 and explain that participants are probably already undertaking aspects of research as part of their teaching practice.

Explain that there are three large sheets of flipchart paper arranged on the walls around the room.

- Each sheet has one of the three aspects of research written on the slide: data collection, decision making and feedback.
• ★ Give the three participants sitting closest to you a marker pen and explain that they are going to begin the process of writing one example on one of the sheets of the flipchart paper (they choose which one).

• Explain that you will then work round the room until everyone has had a go and you have a list of things you already do. It is intended to be a collaborative group task to generate prior knowledge.

• Once each participant has written a response, show slide 11 and check the group’s responses against the list of possible answers. Summarise common responses and comment on any unusual ones.

Explain that, during the session so far, you have introduced definitions of action research, and you have considered which aspects of research you currently undertake. For the remainder of the session, participants will begin to plan for their first cycle of action research.

Step 8: Action research in your role (7 minutes)

★ Show slide 12 and ask participants if they have a stone in their shoe. In other words, is there something within the context of their role which is bothering them?

Ask participants if there is something going on that they don’t quite understand: a teaching approach working far better than expected, or not working so well with a particular group of pupils, or they have some new technology that they don’t quite know how to use effectively.

Explain that the stone in their shoe, or the ‘niggle’ will be the focus of their first cycle of research. Ideally, it should be their own niggle. This is important because the first research cycle needs to provide information that participants can use for the purposes of school development, for their own professional learning and to improve the experiences and outcomes of their pupils.

Show slide 13 and ask participants the four questions. Distribute copies of Handout 1.5 and ask participants to begin to identify their ‘niggle’.

Step 9: What’s going on? (35 minutes)

Show slide 14 and explain that there remain three final tasks before the end of this first session. After a brief input section, participants have 35 minutes to plan their first research cycle, justify their choices to a colleague and then critically appraise the choices of someone else in the group.

Remind participants that action research is made up of cycles. This first cycle is intended to allow participants to find out ‘what’s going on?’ so they can then intervene during a second cycle later on in the course and ask ‘what happens if?’
Explain that slide 14 is an example of one teacher’s desire to work out why the group work part of their lesson doesn’t turn out that well.

- In order to find out what’s going on, they are going to investigate how the groups are organised by analysing the seating plan for the class.
- They are also going to try to find out whether the group work doesn’t turn out that well for the whole class or just some of the pupils or some of the groupings of the class.
- They are going to do this by asking a colleague to carry out on-task/off-task observations.
- Their final question relates to whether the success of group work depends on the day of the week, the task, or something else. If the teacher can’t arrange observation or look back at assessments over time (which lessons they were set), they will keep a log book of notes in the planner.

🌟 Show slide 15 and explain that participants have 15 minutes to work alone, with a colleague or in groups to plan how they are going to find out ‘what’s going on?’ in relation to their own niggle. They should use Handout 1.6 as a guide.

- Remind colleagues that they do not have to collect their evidence from scratch. They should use the information on the flipchart sheets around the room to help.
- After 15 minutes, show slide 16 and ask participants to find someone in the room with whom they have not yet worked.
- Explain that, using the questions on the slide, one participant should explain their starting point, aspect(s) of practice and measure. The other participant should seek clarification and justification of each choice.
- When they have finished, the participants should swap over. Participants have 20 minutes to complete both conversations.

**Step 10: Review/preview (5 minutes)**

Show slide 17 and reintroduce Handout 1.2.

- 🌟 Ask participants to use Handout 1.2 to re-evaluate themselves against the criteria on a scale of 1 to 10. 1 signifies very little existing knowledge and/or skill, 10 signifies a large amount of knowledge and/or skill.
- Ask participants who finish early to justify their evaluations: if there are shifts either up or down the scale, ask them to explain them.
- Show slide 18 and explain that the aims of the next unit are to:
  - share and review the outcomes of your first action research cycle
  - identify the subject of your second action research cycle
  - plan your second action research cycle by considering the research question
  - other possible methods of data collection
  - knowing how to make sense of previous research
  - identifying available support.
What next?

Participants could follow up on this unit by:

- reviewing the outcomes of the self-evaluation tasks using the progress marker (Handout 1.2)
- visiting the Campaign for Learning website accessing Learning to Learn case studies
- reading and summarising their understanding of some of the additional resources (below).

You could prepare for the next unit by:

- collating participants’ responses to the step 4 task; this could be as a table showing how many times each statement was circled
- visiting the Campaign for learning website and accessing Learning to Learn case studies; you need to register a (free) username and password to do this
- completing your own initial action research cycle
- considering how you will present and share your findings
- completing the ‘Before you present’ tasks in Unit 2.

Participants should prepare for the next session by:

- reviewing the outcomes of the self-evaluation tasks using the progress marker (Handout 1.2)
- completing their initial action research cycles
- considering how they will present and share their findings
- visiting the Campaign for Learning website and reviewing some of the information it contains.

What’s changed?

To evaluate the impact of the training session:

- review Steps 3 and 10 (above) using the progress marker (Handout 1.2)
- evaluate the extent to which participants identified similarities and differences between their prior knowledge of research before embarking on this unit
- evaluate the range of issues participants wish to pursue as part of their preliminary action research cycle.

Additional Resources

Exemplar case studies: Campaign for Learning [online]


