



CHAPTER ONE

Some Basics and Some History

Introduction to the Concept of Action Research

Some Basics

To understand what action research (AR) is, it's helpful first to sweep some common but misleading mental images of *research* out of the way. One teacher has described the stereotypical picture as “Big R” research, characterized by “long hours in the library, notes that could fill a novel, and a bibliography several pages long....[with] tension and stress lurking in the shadows” (Hubbard and Power, 1999, xiv). A common alternative picture features a scientist surrounded by tubes, or maybe cages, slaving away in a laboratory night and day to verifiably pin down the *truth* of something. Neither image is likely to hold much appeal for the typical educator—but then, neither image bears any resemblance to the action research process. Action research (AR) involves no helpless dependence on or abject reverence for authorities, no white lab coats, no laboratory, no bells and salivating dogs, no single-minded pursuit of truth.

The image of research as stressful suffering is likely the product of an unhappy experience with a “research paper” in school—a very different task for a very different purpose than action research. The images of *research* as a



scientific, laboratory-oriented activity producing verifiable results comes from decades of educational research that intended to identify the “one best way” to teach. Historically, experts outside the classroom, usually university professors, have conducted such research through laboratory experiments. Their intent was to uncover the best teaching strategies and then offer prescriptions to classroom teachers—a research process that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) refer to as “outside-in,” because it features researchers outside of classrooms designing practice for teachers inside them.

Of course, the work of these outside researchers has provided much useful information on a wide variety of topics—that class size affects learning, for example, or that teachers need to give students more than a few seconds to think about questions. However, many studies in this tradition have also caused practitioners to protest “But children *aren’t* dogs,” or “But laboratories *aren’t* classrooms.” Generations of teachers have objected that one-size-fits-all research prescriptions for teaching did not and could not fit every individual student any more than size six clothing could fit every child aged six, or that one type of clothing could be suitable for every child. Some teaching guidelines developed in traditional research are, as teachers know, equivalent to deciding that all children, including those in Florida, are best dressed in snowsuits.

In calling attention to the variations of real world children and classrooms, critics of traditional research methodology have pointed out that despite its usefulness in some areas, it also has distinct limits. However useful its generalizations may sometimes be, traditional educational research cannot tell any individual teacher what exactly will work best in a particular classroom at a particular moment with a specific class or student. Each classroom is a world unto itself with widely varied students, cultures, values, languages, goals, personalities, constraints and opportunities. Any and all of these factors—along with emotional states, interpersonal dynamics, and even the weather—make any teaching moment a unique one that calls for a teacher’s expertise in choosing among possible strategies. This is a key area where action research is crucially different from traditional research efforts: the researchers are not outsiders, like university professors. Instead, they are insiders, citizens of a school or other



community, who explore improvements in areas they think important. And, the goals of the research are determined by the people who conduct it; action research is a process that pursues improvement in “practical situations...without substantively prescribing objectives to be achieved” (Herbert et al., 2002, p. 127). Goals, as well as researchers, come from the inside rather than outside.

When teachers engage in action research, the questions they ask and the improvements they pursue are as varied as teachers and classrooms themselves. For example, teachers I worked with recently posed the following questions about their own classrooms and practice:

- Children should not be crying in schools. How can I reduce my students’ stress about mandated state tests?
- I know I don’t teach geography well, partly because I don’t know and/or like it. Would learning improve if I turned responsibility for teaching it over to students?
- I worry whether students are learning the most important lessons I can offer them. How well does the curriculum I choose align with my students’ interests and needs?
- I have a student with a disability who seems unengaged and whose aide and family appear to be doing her work for her. What can I do to improve her learning?
- What stereotypes do my students hold about science, about who is good in science and who is bad in science, especially in terms of gender?
- Why are students who enroll in the college classes I teach consistently, predominantly male?

As that last question indicates, the usefulness of action research is not limited to particular levels of teaching. Teachers from pre-kindergarten through graduate school have employed action research to better understand their classrooms and options. The questions above, for example, merely hint at the many areas open to inquiry: students’ emotional health, quality of academic content, pedagogical strategies, alignment of curriculum with students’ interests, the needs of an individual student, cultural influence on student beliefs, and gender issues. As we’ll soon see, the questions can also be much larger, asking about ways to improve conditions outside of classrooms as well as within them.



Action research

a process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than by outside experts; its goal is to identify action that will generate some improvement the researcher believes important.

Once the stereotypes of *research* are swept away, the essential characteristics of **action research** are fairly simply stated:

- It is conducted by those inside a community (teachers, administrators, community members) rather than by outside experts.
- It pursues improvement or better understanding in some area the researcher considers important.
- It involves systematic inquiry, which includes information gathering, analysis and reflection.
- It leads to an action plan, which frequently generates a new cycle of the process.

The work of the teacher cited above who wanted to improve geography teaching and learning in her classroom provides an easily explained example.

First, the teacher—whom I'll call Sue—thought carefully about her classroom experience and identified an area that she wanted to improve. After considering her past efforts, the state of her own knowledge, and her colleagues' comments on constructivist teaching methods and democratic classrooms, Sue wondered whether learning might improve if she turned geography teaching over to students. She created an assignment that did so. Then, she carefully collected information on what happened as students planned, presented and discussed their lessons; analyzed the data she had collected, identifying strengths and weakness of what occurred; and, made changes to the assignment based on her analysis. Next year, she will try out the revised assignment and repeat the research process to determine if she is satisfied with the results. It's not enough to plan and implement an action: its results must be systematically analyzed to determine whether desired improvements have occurred and whether unintended consequences, good or bad, turned up as well. For this reason, the process is generally described as being **cyclical**. This teacher's process might be described as seen in Figure 1.

Cyclical

an ongoing process in which the same steps are continually repeated.

Several models to describe the essential nature of this research cycle have been suggested. One is a helix comprised of three essential and recurring acts: look, think, act (Stringer, 2004). Another three-phase process embeds similar ideas in different terms: reflect, act, evaluate (Hendricks, 2006). Still another proposes a cycle of initiation, detection and judgment (Schmuck, 2006). Whatever the specifics of the model, however, theorists conceive AR as a process in



FIGURE 1: SAMPLE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE FOR A CLASSROOM STUDY

Identify concern (weak geography teaching) → Collect and analyze data to clarify situation (consider personal attributes, thoughts of colleagues) → Plan and implement action (assign geography teaching to students) → Collect and analyze data on effects (notes as groups worked, pre-and post-surveys of student thinking, evaluations of teaching products and discussions) → Identify remaining concerns (students used poor information sources and wanted more choice of topic) → Plan and implement action (revise assignment to correct weaknesses and build on strengths and assign next year) → Collect and analyze data on effects (repeat of earlier effort) → and so on . . .

which one step leads to another over and over in a continual improvement process. The end segment of any cycle frequently generates the first segment of the next one.

Of course, teachers do this kind of analytical thinking about their practice informally every day (Was John confused? Was there really enough time for that activity? Should this lesson have come earlier or later?). AR is a way to build upon what practitioners do naturally by formalizing this informal habit. The advantage to formalizing the process is that in providing more structure, the action research process focuses the participant’s attention on one area for an extended time and ensures not only that new actions result but that they are evaluated on the basis of systematically collected data from real world experience.

Some Variations

While much of the above discussion of action research includes widely accepted generalities, it is important to be aware that there are significant variations in how researchers, theorists and practitioners think about and define the action research process. A growing number of alternative terms reflect such variation: “In the literature and in popular usage, terms such as ‘research,’ ‘action,’ ‘collaborative,’ ‘critical,’ and ‘inquiry’ have been combined with one another and with the term “teacher” to signal a wide range of meanings and purposes” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993, p. xiii). One educational action research text that focuses primarily on teacher research, for example, differentiates among six different types of research teachers may conduct: teacher research, classroom research, action research, teacher action research, classroom action research, and collaborative

Critical (emancipatory or liberatory)

term/s indicating a concern with unequal power arrangements and a conception of education as activism in the interest of social justice; such work is often significantly grounded in the work of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire.



action research (Holly et al., 2005, p. 49). Another lists four different types: collaborative action research, critical action research, classroom action research, and participatory action research (Hendricks, 2006). Each list leaves out still other possibilities: teacher inquiry, classroom inquiry, practitioner research and so on.

The proliferation of terms makes obvious that action research has come to mean different things for different people, and the differences are significant. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) note, they signify important differences in key areas including: which research **paradigm** is appropriate for action research; who rightfully produces knowledge and who uses it; and who or what should benefit from the research work. Obviously, such differences in conceptual thinking lead to very different definitions and forms of practice. In order to develop “clarity of purpose among those who would use the term” (Noffke, 1997, p. 308), it is important for those interested in AR to examine the variations and think through what exactly they will do—and why—if they choose to do *action research*. As a preliminary to the fuller discussion, however, a sampling of diverse terminology can offer some insight into variations.

At a simplistic surface level, any term that names an element of education—*teacher* research or *classroom* research, for example—indicates that the work is being done in education, distinguishing it from efforts in other areas where action research is also popular, like business and social work. The term *teacher research* also indicates that it is teachers (not administrators or consultants) who are the researchers. The term *teacher inquiry*, in avoiding the word *research*, suggests that the work is intended to benefit the practitioner without any particular concern for contributing to a knowledge base. Others would argue that the term *practitioner inquiry* is a better descriptor for the work of an individual teacher focused on his or her own classroom, and that the term *action research* should be reserved for collaborative efforts involving more than one person (Stringer, 2004). Others use the term *collaborative action research* to indicate the expectation for group work. Moreover, if the word *critical* is added to any of these terms—as in *critical action research* or *critical teacher research*—it signals that the work will focus on social issues, especially unequal power arrangements and social justice.

Paradigm

a world view; a set of
theoretical or philosophical
beliefs.



Obviously, there is no universally accepted definition for action research or educational action research because there are so many variations on the concept. Therefore, “action research is best thought of as a large family, one in which beliefs and relationships vary greatly... [as] a group of ideas emergent in various contexts” (Noffke, 1997, p. 306). And yet, with all of that said, the essential characteristics identified above do apply broadly: Action research is a process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than outside experts; its goal is to identify action that will generate improvement the researchers believe important. That can serve as a working definition, then, with the caveat that this core idea can become many different things when translated to practice. As will be evident later, common variations in conception and practice include: whether one or more than one researcher is involved; whether, in addition to practitioners, others—like community members or consultants—are involved; how data is collected, analyzed, reported and used; and whether the purpose of the research is to contribute to or to change the field of educational research itself, or to change the teacher, the teaching, the students, the classroom, the school—or the world beyond the classroom door.

In the Beginning: Some Key Figures

As is true in any field, the seeds of contemporary thinking, including some of its major variations, can be traced to key influential figures. Because important early work was done by a variety of people whose work had different emphases and purposes, many of today’s action research “family members” have features inherited from various ancestors. Following is a brief portrait gallery of some key figures whose work shaped today’s conceptions and who are frequently referred to in much of the action research literature. Familiarity with some ideas from these early theorists and researchers provides some foundation for understanding action research’s contemporary popularity and trends.

John Dewey

During the early twentieth century, John Dewey was such a prolific writer and influential figure that many later developments in education have connections to his work. Although his name does not appear consistently in action



research literature, some writers do note that important features of what we know as action research are outlined in his work (Holly et al., 2005; Tomal, 2003; Schmuck, 2006, for example). Like many others of his time, Dewey believed that scientific inquiry and theory have a definite place in education. Unlike them, however, he argued that research shouldn't be done solely by outsiders on behalf of teachers, but also by the insiders, teachers themselves.

While others imagined teachers as uncritical recipients of what expert researchers deemed best practices, Dewey argued that research findings need to be tested and adjusted by teachers in the field. Situations differ, and what works best in one case may not work best in another. He compared the process to that used by a doctor, who is familiar with existing research findings but nevertheless treats each patient as an individual for whom common diagnoses and prescriptions may or may not apply: "after all, cases are like, not identical.... Indications of the standardized or general methods used in like cases by others—particularly by those who are already experts—are of worth or of harm according as they make [a practitioner's] personal reaction more intelligent or as they induce a person to dispense with exercise of his own judgment" (1916, Chapter 13, "Method as General and Individual," ¶4).

Dewey challenged the idea that teachers are a kind of puppet whose strings are pulled by outside researchers. Instead, he characterized teachers as active agents who need to be familiar with the research findings of others, but who are capable of—indeed, responsible for—deciding for themselves what findings might or might not apply to specific situations in their own practice. In fact, Dewey expected teachers to do a great deal of such thinking on their own as a necessary and integral part of teaching, which he considered to a "reflective" activity—an idea later significantly built upon by Donald Schön in his influential work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), which also is frequently referenced in action research literature.

Moreover, Dewey's description of scientific method as it applies to the classroom still constitutes a good characterization of the action research process. The model he advanced begins in a practitioner's "perplexity, confusion, doubt" and moves through analysis and hypothesis to an action plan for improvement that must be "tried in the world" (1916, Chapter 11, "Reflection in Experience," ¶7).



Today, Dewey's "confusion, perplexity, doubt" appear in AR guides as the source of teachers' action research questions—or "wonderings" (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003). More important for the concept of action research, however, is Dewey's insistence that any idea for action must be tested in the world of practice. Dewey was among the first to insist that educational research must occur not only in the lab but in the world. Teachers, he argued, have a significant role to play in developing, testing, and adapting findings that they try out in their classrooms. While he valued traditional research findings, he believed them to be always incomplete guides for teachers.

John Collier

From 1933–1945, John Collier was Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Although that position appears far removed from educational research, much of what he did as Commissioner helped lay the foundation for action research. After decades of the United States government trying to eliminate American Indians' land holdings and culture—and eventually their lives—Collier wrote extensively about the injustices perpetrated on indigenous peoples and the harm the government had imposed. His concern as Commissioner was to find ways to restore dignity to and improve living conditions for the remaining tribes, who were living in poverty and decline after decades of mistreatment. His concern was change and improvement, and he brought a new perspective both to the Bureau and to **social science** research when he took on the job.

Social science

Science exploring the nature of human societies and interactions, including education, sociology, political science, and economics.

One of his chief criticisms—similar to that of teachers who reject one-size-fits-all educational strategies—was that government policies assumed that all tribes were the same. In reality, tribes varied widely: some farmed in the desert without irrigation, and others with it; some specialized in fishing, and others in hunting and trapping; some grazed sheep, and others grazed cattle or reindeer; some believed in laboring to support themselves, and others in renting out their lands and doing as little work as possible. And yet, as Collier objected, "To this boundless diversity our government [has]...for a century—until a few years ago—tried to apply a single formula, one unyielding concept and program" (1945, p. 268). Government policy had been, in other words, the equivalent of prescribing snowsuits for every child.



In contrast, Collier's efforts to find ways to accommodate the diversity of the tribes led him, like Dewey, to argue that social science research needs to be carried out in the complex real world settings where findings are to apply. As Dewey called for teachers to be among those researching practice, Collier called for those who would be affected by the findings to be among those who helped shape them: "[S]ince the findings of the research must be carried into effect by the administrator and the layman, and must be criticized by them through their experience, the administrator and the layman must themselves participate creatively in the research, impelled as it is from their own area of need" (1945, p. 276). Collier's assertion also embeds a second characteristic common to today's action research—that questions are to come from participants' "own area of need" (similar to Dewey's area of "confusion, perplexity, doubt"), a direct contrast to traditional methodology in which experts pose questions. Collier insisted that the surest route to improvement is to allow people who would be affected by change to decide where change is wanted and what action is most likely to effect it—a process he termed "action-research, research-action" (1945, p. 293).

Because education is integrally related to change and quality of life, it is not surprising that one of the several areas where Collier promoted action research projects was education, which he believed needed to be shaped "in terms of live local issues and problems" (1945, p. 274). Ultimately, he became active in the promotion of **progressive** schools, and as Commissioner, he developed collaborative educational research efforts between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other groups, including the University of Chicago (Collier, 1945; Noffke, 1997). Working with five different tribes, Collier arranged for "a searching study of child development within the context of the community, including the governmental and non-Indian institutions...against the background of the living tribal past and within the web of the natural environment." Although he imagined teams of researchers that would include outside experts, Collier insisted that lay workers and administrators were to be "partners in the research from start to finish" (p. 295). According to Noffke (1997), Collier's "focus on grassroots interest, on collaboration within communities and across disciplines, and on the need for direct links to social action for improvement was a key element

Progressive

an adjective used to describe a set of theorists and practices that define the goal of education as preparing students to become active citizens who promote democratic life.



of this early form of action research" (p. 302). His vision of teams of researchers representing various perspectives (experts as well as members of the community) who work collaboratively together is evident in various strands of today's action research efforts that seek to develop research communities.

In her extensive review of action research literature, Noffke (1997) finds that Collier is one of two figures most often credited with beginning the field of action research, either separately or together. The other is Kurt Lewin, whom one writer terms "the grandfather of action research" (Schmuck, 2006, p. 145).

Kurt Lewin

Like Collier, Lewin was concerned with social issues. As a Jew who emigrated from Germany in 1933 because of widespread discrimination and the rapid rise of Nazism, Lewin was particularly interested in alleviating social prejudice and injustice. And, like Dewey and Collier, he valued basic research, what he referred to as "general laws," but also believed that research needed to move into the real world context: "Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice" (Lewin, 1946, p. 36, 34). His imagery echoes Dewey when he argues that in addition to a knowledge of general laws, the engineer or surgeon "has to know too the specific character of the situation at hand" (p. 37). More specifically, he stressed the need to consider "the inhabitants of that particular main street and those side and end streets which make up the small or large town in which the individual group worker is supposed to do his job" (p. 34). Lewin and his graduate students—many of whom became well known for their own subsequent action research work—completed pioneering studies on inter-group relations not only in business but also in many areas of community life. His description of the action research process is also familiar: "a spiral of steps each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action" (1946, p. 38).

Lewin had a lasting impact on industrial relations because of his work in factories, where he used social science research to counter economic and social discrimination. In one of his best known studies, he demonstrated that untrained female workers hired for factory work, whom managers generally resented and believed could



never perform as well as men, were in fact equally capable. Through an experimental action research process, Lewin demonstrated that all workers could perform at an equally high level if they were trained not in the usual authoritarian and didactic manner, but if groups were given some control over their work and the ability to offer feedback on their training. In this well known work, Lewin not only improved the climate for female workers but also demonstrated the benefit of creating more democratic workplaces. In encouraging participants to systematically collect data to assess situations, Lewin helped many workers and citizens uncover discrepancies between their often-biased beliefs and the reality of a situation.

Among Lewin's greatest talents, says Adelman (1993), was that he could "take contentious social issues and refute the taken-for-granted, often pessimistic assumptions about 'human nature,' and replace these with what has become a new 'common sense'" (p. 9). Lewin's ideas filtered into education, and they were adopted and implemented by the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute for School Experimentation at Teachers College, Columbia University as well as at the Tavistock Institute in England (Creswell, 2002). They are most evident today in conceptions of action research that involve group work facilitated or supported by an outside expert.

Stephen M. Corey

Most often credited with promoting action research in education, Stephen Corey served as a dean and professor of education at Teachers College as well as executive director of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute, which as noted above, was significantly influenced by the ideas of social psychologist Kurt Lewin. From these prestigious positions, he promoted the use of action research for educational improvement and, with his colleagues, emphasized the "knowledge, vitality, and dignity of teachers" (Noffke, 1997, p. 316). As a result, his work is particularly known for having promoted and advanced the professionalism and status of teachers.

The Institute developed a collaborative relationship with schools, doing a great deal of work on curriculum, and it maintained the principle that parents, teachers, students and others of the school community had roles as participants in the research, not simply as passive research



subjects (Noffke, 1997). In 1953, after eight years' experience with action research projects nationally, which included extensive work with administrators in the Denver schools (Schmuck, 2006), Corey authored *Action Research to Improve School Practice*. That text is a seminal work whose importance continues to be recognized; It includes six conditions that promote the success of action research efforts that still offer valuable guidance: willingness to admit weakness, opportunity for creativity, opportunity to test ideas, cooperation among administration and staff, systematic data collection, and the time necessary to engage in the reflective process (Schmuck, 2006).

Sensitive to an emerging conception of action research as something less, and less important than, traditional scientific method, Corey offered a vigorous defense, arguing that it is an important and legitimate tool for educators to improve their practice: "The action researcher is interested in the improvement of the educational practices in which he is engaging. He undertakes research in order to find out how to do his job better—action research means research that affects actions" (Corey 1949, p. 509) (in McTaggart, 1991, p. 11). Corey's emphasis on collaboration and on teachers researching elements of their own practice are characteristic of many contemporary action research approaches.

Later On: Renewal in the 1960s and 1970s

Following these prominent early efforts, interest in action research waned for a variety of reasons, including increasing criticism, noted above, that it was not a truly scientific or particularly valuable process. Corey's defense of action research was muted in an environment that included teacher shortages, change in school populations, the Cold War, and McCarthyism; increasingly, it was felt that the issues of curriculum and policy were best left in the hand of experts (Noffke, 1997). Moreover, the federal government began funding educational research, and its criteria for funding appeared to discriminate between researchers and practitioners; action research proposals were often deemed "confused" and fared poorly (Sanford, 1970).

As a result, the focus of action research for those who remained interested shifted from a way to foster large changes in both policy and practice to a means of professional development, especially for teachers. Figures frequently associated with this shift include Hilda Taba and



Abraham Shumsky, who helped moved the “concept of teacher-researcher toward that of teacher-learner” (Noffke, 1997, p. 318). Frequently, outside experts—university professors as a rule—were brought in to facilitate such research. Whereas Corey stressed the professionalism of teachers and the contributions they could make to knowledge in the field, this trend during the middle of the century directed teachers’ attention to their own growth—a valuable pursuit, of course, but far more limited than the possibilities imagined by reformers like Lewin and Corey. So thoroughly had the focus changed and the expert resumed the role of researcher that in 1970 an article appeared in *Journal of Social Issues* titled “Whatever Happened to Action Research?” (Sanford, 1970).

However, even as one writer was examining the ghost of early action research work, others were publishing ideas that would give action research new life into the next century. In the 1960s and 70s, new works and leaders again refocused the field, providing contributions that remain seminal to current thinking.

Lawrence Stenhouse

Lawrence Stenhouse, who founded the Center for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia, England in 1970, was a key supporter of teachers as action researchers, echoing earlier champions of action research when he argued “researchers must justify themselves to practitioners, not practitioners to researchers” (1981, p. 113). Stenhouse’s 1975 text, *An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, significantly helped revive interest in the idea of teacher-researcher and the ways in which schools and teaching could be improved through systematic self-analysis.

His work is responsible for the widespread growth of action research communities in schools in England and internationally. In 1976 with his colleague John Elliott, Stenhouse founded the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN), an international group of teachers, administrators and teacher educators involved in action research efforts (Holly et al., 2005). Still an extremely active organization that now includes “members from educational, health, social care, commercial, and public services settings,” CARN launched its *Educational Action Research Journal* in 1993 ([http://www. did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/](http://www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk/)



carn/whatis.shtml). Stenhouse's legacy has been in developing and promoting mutually supportive action research communities.

Paulo Freire

While Stenhouse reiterated the need for practitioners to conduct their own research, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in the last decades of the twentieth century refocused and reenergized some of Collier and Lewin's earlier ideas about using action research as a means to improving social conditions. It is impossible to summarize or adequately capture Freire's importance and influence in educational reform; as Joe Kincheloe has said, "I suppose Paulo Freire is the closest thing education has to a celebrity" (1997, p. vii). His many works have been foundational to current reform efforts world-wide; perhaps the best known and most widely cited is his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

Freire theorized that education is properly a process of learning to "read" the world, and from his perspective, education and social activism are one and the same thing. According to Freire, both the oppressed—those who suffer discrimination—and the oppressors—those whose often unacknowledged privileges come at the expense of others—need to engage in a self-critical process that raises questions about previously unexamined thinking and habits. Only through such self-awareness can people free themselves from unquestioned (and often unconscious) cultural assumptions and make genuinely free choices. Unexamined cultural assumptions (for example, people are poor because they're lazy) are a kind of mental prison that cloud a person's vision. Freire's pedagogy intends to stop people from assuming that things must be as they are: to start questioning what *is* and trying to conceptualize what *might* be.

Freire's work supports action research in that it stressed that those who live a situation must be the ones who analyze it and identify possibilities for action and change; what makes his work seminal is his stress on power relationships and social justice. Those who have adopted Freire's perspective argue for various forms of critical action research (also called emancipatory or liberatory). These models are overtly activist, based on the belief that many education problems are born of social and economic conditions that require change.



Cohesive Threads and Early Tensions

In the work of these early theorists, the patriarchs of the action research family, several features in contemporary action research are evident. All stressed that actions to improve real world conditions—whether tribal living conditions, managerial attitude, worker performance, teacher performance, student achievement, or social inequity—must be informed by the thinking of those to be affected by any resulting change. Thus, every form of action research involves the worker or manager or teacher or student or school or community member to be affected.

Also evident in this brief survey are the several threads that have come together to form different strands of current conceptions. Woven through the work of these various theorists are various emphases on: individuals vs. groups as researchers; promotion of democratic life; the proper relationship between experimental research and field research; the appropriate role of the expert; a focus on improving individuals and/or organizations and/or communities and/or overarching social arrangements. Together, their work responds to questions that remain under discussion:

- What are the appropriate roles for practitioner and expert in generating and using knowledge?
- Does action research produce personally meaningful advice for the practitioner, important feedback to experts, or new knowledge for the field?
- Should action research pursue improvement in individuals, organizations, or societies?

Various answers to these central questions, most often following a path begun by one or more of these early theorists, provide the varied answers to the question “What is action research?”

However, an essential preliminary question is “What counts as research?” Every definition of action research includes assumptions about this core issue, which is a longstanding and exceedingly controversial one. Therefore, before offering more detail on various AR models, Chapter 2 outlines alternative paradigms of scientific research and explains which of these paradigms action research fits within and why.