



"But how can you prove it?" Issues of Rigour in Action Research

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Many of the people who are involved with the Stronger Families Fund projects, as well as those in government departments and the wider research community, may be coming into contact with action research for the first time with the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Action research has a different kind of methodology from some of the more scientific or experimental forms of research with which people may be more familiar.

A question that often comes up when people encounter action research for the first time is 'is it rigorous?' The answer to this question is a resounding 'yes'. This article explains how action research achieves rigour in its careful application of multiple methods techniques.

What is rigorous research?

Rigorous research in many of the areas that people are more familiar with is often defined as being able to measure or quantify results. This is especially so in research undertaken in the scientific community, and may include methods such as pre- and post- testing, statistical analysis, or questionnaires.

Another argument, however, is that rigour is evident in research when the methods used are those that can represent the fullest, most detailed, rich and expressive picture of a particular situation.

As Swepson (2000: 8) has put it: 'a more appropriate criterion of rigour is the degree of the relevance of the methodology to the problem; the one which best allows the researcher to conduct systematic inquiry in order to present a warranted assertion - that is, the methodology is fit for a given function.'

Rigour in action research is therefore achieved when the most appropriate methodologies are applied to data collection and analysis.

Multiple methods (triangulation)

According to Dick (1999: 1), action research is made up of 'a family of research

methodologies with the dual aims of action (that is, change) and research (that is, understanding).'

The methods used in action research are required to be responsive and flexible if they are to achieve both change and understanding. This is made easy by the fact that action research is based on the idea of multiple methods, sometimes also referred to as triangulation, which means a number of different methods are used to generate the fullest possible understanding of an issue.

The idea of multiple methods or triangulation is that, just as a stool is more solid if it rests on three legs rather than one or two, information collected will be more solid if it is collected from more than one source, at more than one point in time, in a number of different ways.

Some of the wide range of information gathering strategies used in action research are: discussions, notes, reflections, oral histories, case studies, questionnaires, surveys, focus groups, audits, statistics, checklists, journals, photographs, videotapes and logs of meetings, events and strategies. The rigour comes in choosing and applying the method that is most appropriate to the situation, then using another method and another one until a rich body of information is gathered that puts together a comprehensive picture (Dick 1999: 1; Caro 2000: 14).

Cycles and participation

Action research progresses through cycles of planning-acting-observing-reflecting. Each cycle informs the next stage of the research. The cyclical and action orientation nature of action research is, in and of itself, conducive to rigour. As data collection and interpretation tend to occur at the same time, later cycles can be used to test both data and interpretations from earlier cycles (Dick 1999: 1).

Furthermore, the participatory nature of action research means as many people as possible are involved in the research process - as both researchers and informants. This form of triangulation generates multiple data sources and wide and diverse samples (Dick 1999: 3).

As is true in any field of research, rigour is in large part dependent on the researchers themselves. Good researchers in any field need to be explicit about the values that motivate them to be systematic in their sampling and analysis, and must understand and acknowledge the context in which research occurs (Swepson 2000: 8). Action research assists in achieving this kind of rigour through its ongoing practice of reflection and self-examination as an integral part of its cycle.

The conventional idea of rigour often implies both the independence of the observer and quantification of observations. While this is important in some contexts, prioritising these aspects of rigour does not give enough credit to the value of the different perspectives of multiple observers and the richness and appropriateness of qualitative descriptions in some circumstances (Swepson 2000: 7).

Action research can offer a rich picture of a problem. The careful selection and use of multiple methods, the cyclical nature of the research process, and the focus on participation, provides the rigour in this approach.

References

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