

This is a short overview of collaborative action research revised yearly, the current version is February 2019. Please feel free to share this document. An [interactive tutorial](#) with videos, activities and resources is available here or through the "interact" menu icon.

(Thanks to those who have translated this article (Unfortunately, translations are of earlier versions so google translator may still be your best choice): [Uzbek](#), [Russian](#), [Chinese](#), [Czech](#), [Latvian](#), [Swedish](#), [Ukrainian](#), [Indonesian](#), [Macedonian](#), [Thai](#), [Portuguese](#), and [Bosnian](#).

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## Understanding Collaborative Action Research

Margaret Riel

The Center's approach to collaborative action research (informed by McNiff, 2013; Fine, 2018; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Wood, 2017) is to define it as a process of deep inquiry into one's professional interactions with others in service of moving towards an envisioned future, more closely aligned with social justice values. This formulation represents a tension between forces that lead to personal, professional and social change. Action research can be seen as a systematic, reflective study of one's actions, and the effects of these actions, in a workplace, organizational, or community context. As such, it involves deep inquiry into one's professional practice. Importantly, it is also a collaborative process as it is done WITH people in a social context and understanding the change means probing multiple understanding of complex social systems. Finally, as research, it implies a commitment to data sharing and knowledge construction.

People use a range of modifiers for action research. Many different dimensions can be highlighted in different ways to create what some have called a family of approaches to action research (Noffke & Somekh, 2009; McNiff, 2013; Rowell, Polush, Riel & Bruewer, 2015; Rowell, Riel & Polush, 2016). We use *collaborative* action research to highlight the different ways in which action research involves collaboration with critical friends. These collaborations can be with people outside of the setting to help understand the action research process and results (Gordon, 2008; Sangor, 2010); or with participants in the setting who are engaged in active learning (Fine, 2018; Zuber-Skerritt & Wood, 2019) or action research (Ósk Sigurðardóttir, 2019) as part of the collaborative action research process.

Action researchers examine their interactions and relationships in social settings seeking opportunities for improvement. As designers and stakeholders, they work with their colleagues to propose new courses of action that help their community improve work practices. As researchers, they seek evidence from multiple sources to help them analyze reactions to the action taken. They recognize their view as one perspective and seek to develop their understanding of the events from multiple perspectives. The action researcher uses data collected from interactions with others to characterize the forces in ways that can be shared with other practitioners. Data analysis leads to a reflective phase in which the action researchers formulates new plans for action during the next cycle.

Action research provides a path of learning from and through one's practice through a series of reflective stages that facilitate the development of progressive problem solving (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993). Over time, action researchers develop a deep understanding of how a variety of social and environmental forces interact to create complex patterns. Since these forces are dynamic, action research is a process of living one's theory into practice (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010) or taking a living and learning stance towards teaching (Clive Beck, 2016). This diagram illustrates the process of action research through time.

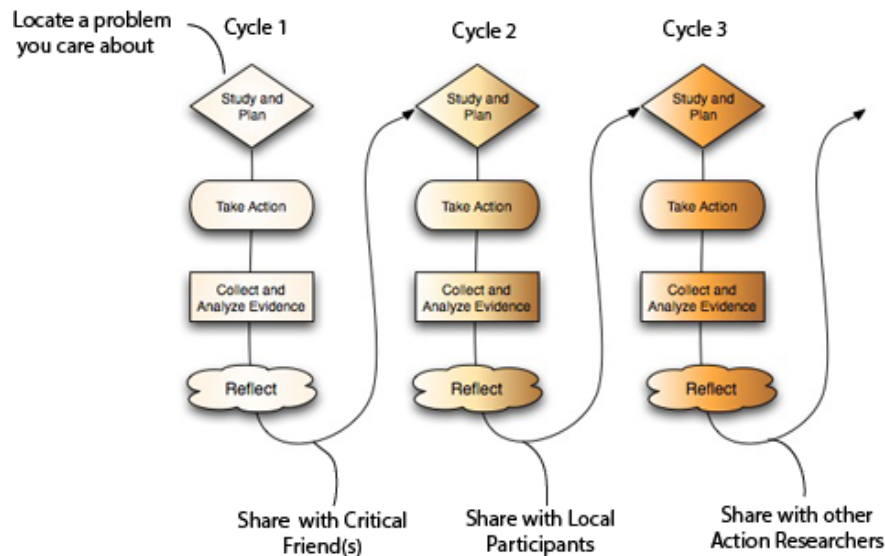


Figure 1: The iterative process of action research

The subject(s) of action research are the actions taken, the resulting change, and the transformation thinking, acting, and feeling by the persons enacting the change. While the design of action research may originate with an individual, the process of change is always social. Over time, the action researcher often extends the arena of change to a widening group of stakeholders. The goal is a deeper understanding of the factors of change which result in positive personal, professional, and organizational change.

This form of research then is an iterative, cyclical process of reflecting on practice, taking action, reflecting, and taking further action. Therefore, the research takes shape while it is being performed. Greater understanding from each cycle points the way to improved practice (Riel and Rowell, 2016).

Action researchers differ in the weight that they put on different factors or dimensions of action research (for more discussion and examples, see Rowell, Riel and Polush, 2016). Each action researcher evolves his or her approach to doing action research as the conditions and support structures are unique. To understand how action research varies, I describe two points, A, and B, along six dimensions. When someone engages in action research, they (or others) make choices that place them at some point along the continuum for each dimension. Some will argue that side A, or B, or a perfect balance between them, is ideal, or even necessary, to call the process action research. Most will have compelling arguments for why all action research should be done in the way they advocate. The dialogue is healthy and helps us each understand the value of the positions we take. By understanding the boundaries, we develop a deeper understanding of the process. (If you click on the continuum, you can make your own choices and compare them with hundreds of thousands of other responders.)



<https://www.actionresearchtutorials.org/2-action-research-polls/>

- A. Practice**- Emphasis on creating a transformative change in a social setting by taking purposeful action
- B. Inquiry** - Emphasis on rigorous methodology and methods for validating assumptions about what changed

**A. Theory from Practice** - Using practices to generate theories beginning with values, needs, and knowledge of human interaction

**B. Theory into Practice** - Using social science findings to inform patterns of change

**A. Inside Expertise**- Action researchers are empowered to locate problems of practice and develop methods to improve them

**B. Outside Expertise** - Action researchers form partnerships with outside experts to guide the process

**A. Individual Process** - Action researchers select their own questions to investigate

**B. Group Process** - A group of action researchers select a common question or set of questions to investigate

**A. Problem-Based Approach**- Action Researchers locate problems and engage in progressive problem-solving in cycles

**B. Inquiry-Based Approach** - Action Researchers explore effective practices to better understand and perfect them through multiple cycles

**A. Identity Transformation** - The primary outcome of action research is to change to the way the action researcher thinks, acts and feels

**B. Social Change** -The primary outcomes of action research is the shift in the social context where people collectively change how they act, think and feel

- A. Shared Practices** - Action Researchers share what they have learned informally at their site  
**B. Shared Knowledge**- Action Researchers share their findings in more formal contexts

Researchers, as well as practitioners, often have strong views about what are the essential (and nonessential) characteristics of action research (Rowell, Riel, & Polush, 2017). The movement to one or the other side of each continuum represents shifts in the action research approach.

For many, action research is a disposition of mind as well as a research approach. It is a commitment to cycles of collective inquiry with shared reflections on the outcomes leading to new ideas. When it is done as a whole-school reform effort (Gordon, 2008) or as a model for the professional training of teachers (Riel & Rowell, 2017) it can become a powerful way to transform schools and departments of education into sustainable learning organizations.

### Goals of Collaborative Action Research include:

- To improve professional practice through continual learning and progressive problem solving;
- To achieve a deeper understanding of organizational change through collective actions;
- To improve the community in which one's practice is embedded through participatory action learning or research.

Collaborative Action Research involves a systematic process of examining the evidence. The data analysis can be done by action researcher(s), but is more powerful when it is done with a group of people who are invested in the outcome. This type of research builds knowledge, informs theory, and changes practice. The validity of action research does not come from cross-setting comparisons as much as from the over-time iterative analysis. Critical reflection is at the heart of action research. When this reflection is based on careful examination of evidence from multiple perspectives, it can provide an effective strategy for improving the organization's ways of working and the whole organizational culture. It can be the process through which an organization or community learns.

It can also provide research knowledge to guide others who are working in similar settings or who have similar change visions. While some question the validity of action research and see the results of only a practical nature (Ellstrom, 2007), For the knowledge to have validity, Ellstrom recommends collaborative inquiry between a university researcher with theoretical expertise and an action researcher with practical knowledge. He suggest that classroom inquiry should involved a university researcher paired with the practitioner and the practitioner who would be focused on changing practice while the researcher would be analysing the data and writing about knowledge and theories. This approach does not empower practitioners to engage in their own knowledge building process, but insteads continues to suggest a dependence on the academy to share research findings. I reject the premise of his arguments that challenge both the value and validity of action research. I have watched practitioners develop research skills over time that are similar to those of university researchers. I see value in reworking his model of overlapping systems, but not between action researchers and university researchers. I have revised his model to help think about how action researchers might conceptualize the way they partner with participants in their action research. It provides a way to conceptualize how action learning and action research might work together.

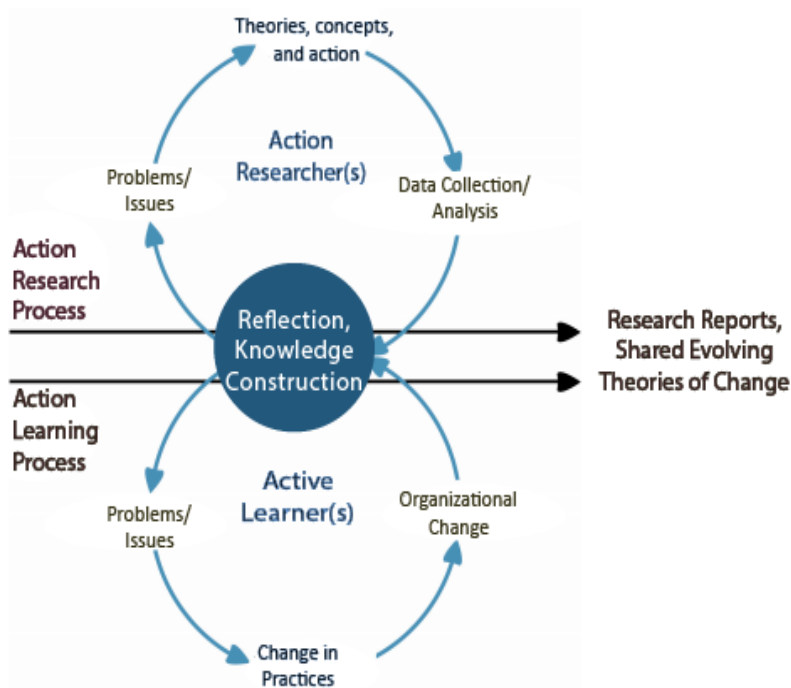
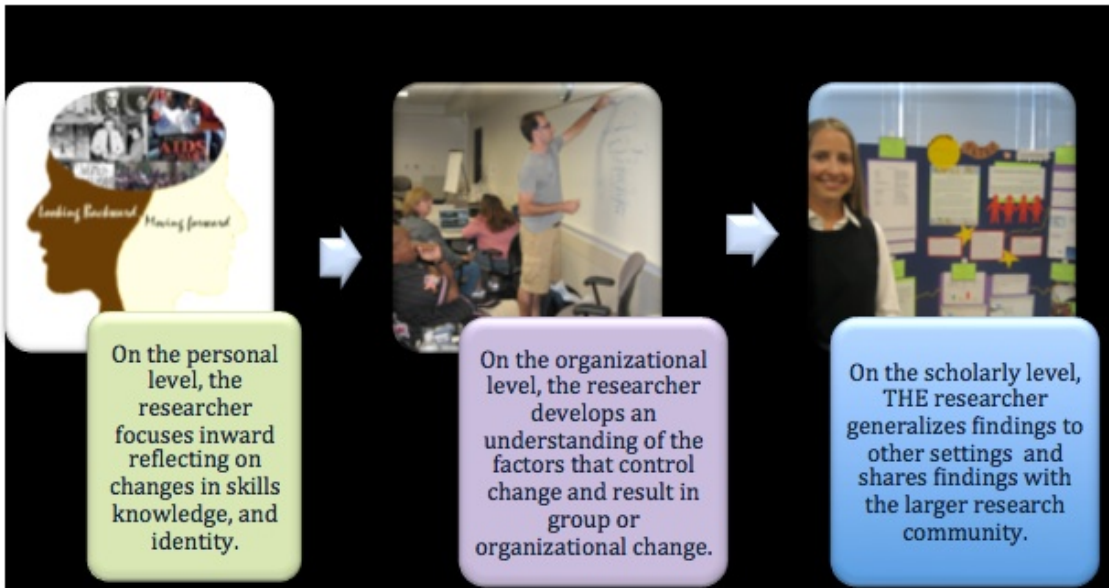


Figure 3: Relationship between action research and action learning process (adapted from Ellstrom's (2006) model)

### Outcomes of Collaborative Action Research

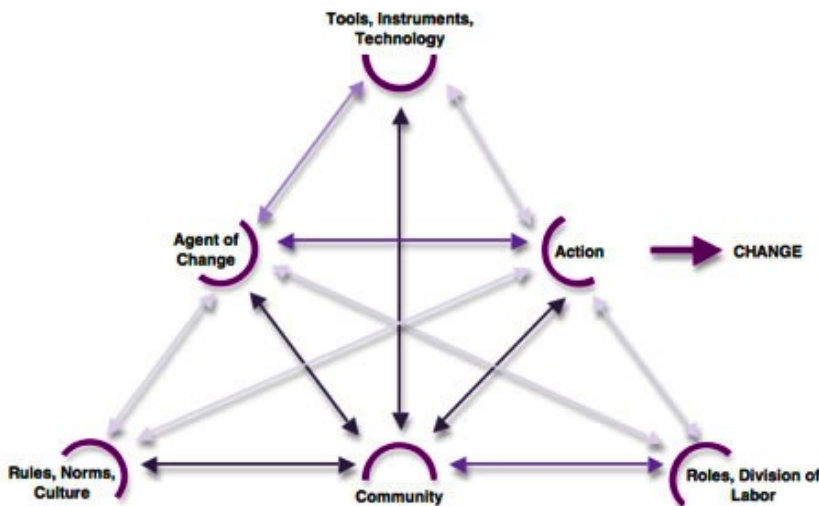
We conceptualize collaborative action research as having three outcomes—on the personal, organizational and scholarly levels.



(from Riel and Lepori, 2011)

At the personal level, it is a systematic set of methods for interpreting and evaluating one’s actions with the goal of improving practice. Action research is often located in schools and done by teachers, but it can also be carried out in museums, medical organizations, corporations, churches, and clubs—any setting where people are engaged in collective, goal-directed activity. Equally important, not all teacher research is action research. Teachers can do ethnographic, evaluative or experimental research that is NOT action research. The process of doing action research involves progressive problem solving, balancing efficiency with innovation thereby developing what has been called an “adaptive” form of expertise (Hatano and Inagaki, 1986).

At the organizational level, action research is about understanding the system of interactions that defines a social context. Kurt Lewin proposed action research as a method of understanding social systems or organizational learning. He claimed that the best way to test understanding is to try to effect change. Action research goes beyond self-study because actions, outcomes, goals, and assumptions are located in complex social "activity systems" (Engeström, 2004). The action researcher(s) begin with a theory of action focused on the intentional introduction of change into a social system with assumptions about the outcomes. This theory testing requires careful attention to data, and skill in interpretation and analysis. Theories, such as Activity theory, social network theory, system theories, and tools such as surveys, interviews and focus groups can help the action researchers acquire a deep understanding of change in social contexts within organizations.

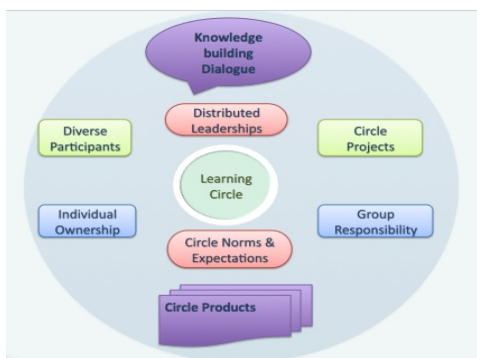


(Activity Theory Model based on the work of Engeström, 2004))

At the scholarly level, the action researcher produces validated findings and assumes a responsibility to share these findings with those in their setting and with the broader research community. Many people acquire expertise in their workplace, but researchers value the process of building knowledge through ongoing dialogue about the nature of their findings. Engaging in this dialogue, through writing or presenting at conferences and encouraging and supporting others in the process to do the same, is part of the process of collaborative action research.

**Action Research, Learning Circles, and Professional Communities**

Action research is conducted in the workplace or community space with others. It is a collaborative process. Doing action research is more effective when action researchers can benefit from the help of



a community of action researchers. This can be as part of a professional learning community at the school (Gordon, 2008; Sagor, 2010) or through collaboration using [learning circles](#)—a structure for organizing group interaction. Combining the collaborative structure of [learning circles with the action research process](#) is an effective way to provide high levels of support for action researchers as they design their action and engage in the process of studying the outcomes. Michelle Fine (2018) has a long history of working with different marginalized communities of color, of gender orientations, and of migration status. She mobilizes groups of underserved populations to take collective action to solve injustices that they experience by engaging in collective community action. She has evolved strategic and procedural knowledge around issues of power, control, and division of labor that can inform the work of others who undertake similar collaborative action research. Her work helps give voice and power as these groups to create and share data-driven knowledge with groups of power to address injustice.

## Developing Action Research Questions: A Guide to Progressive Inquiry

The questions asked by action researchers guide their process. A good question will inspire one to look closely and collect evidence that will help find possible answers. What are good examples of action research questions? What are questions that are less likely to promote the process of deep sustained inquiry? The best question is the one that will inspire the researcher to look at their practice deeply and to engage in cycles of continuous learning from the everyday practice of their craft. These questions come from a desire to have practice align with values and beliefs. Exploring these questions helps the researcher to be progressively more effective in attaining their personal goals and developing professional expertise.

Good questions often arise from visions of improved practice and emerging theories about the change that will move the researcher closer to the ideal state of working practices. When stated in an if/then format, they can take the shape of a research hypothesis. If I [insert the action to be taken], how will it affect [describe one or more possible consequences of the action]? We will look at two examples, one from education and one from a business.

## Development of Action Research Questions in an Educational Context

Suppose the researcher is worried about designing the learning context to meet the needs of students who are currently not doing well in the classroom. The general question might be:

*How can I personalize instruction to match the diverse needs of my students??*

This forms a good overall goal which can then lead to many possible cycles of action research, each with a separate question. I find that forming cycle research questions in two parts is helpful. The first half describes the action and the second part focuses on the outcome that is anticipated and will be measured.

Consider this question:

*If I listen to students, will I have a better understanding of them?*

This question suggests an action and a possible outcome but they are vague in both in the description of the action and in the possible outcome. It is not clear how the action researcher will increase attention to students and what evidence will help evaluate the action.

Now consider:

*If I set up community circle time to listen to students describe their learning experiences in my classroom (description of the action), in what ways, if any, will the information about their learning processes lead to changes in my teaching practices (description of the outcome that will be studied)?*

Now it is clear what the researcher intends to do and what a possible outcome might be. In listening to students, the researcher might discover information that will lead directly to an experiment in instructional design. Or might refocus the overall goal to one that was not apparent when the researcher began the inquiry.

## Development of Action Research Questions in a Business Context

The following is another example, from a business setting where people in diverse offices are working in ways that would benefit from greater coordination.

The action researcher might identify the problem as one in which poor communication results in decisions being made without attending to the issue of how a decision affects the larger system. The researcher might see a role for technology in forging a solution to this problem, such as creating a database for storing and sharing documents. The overall research question might be:

*How can the development of a common location for shared knowledge and the use of interactive communication tools increase the collaborative effectiveness of team-based decision-making in our different regions?*



The next step is to define what kind of communication tool will be used and how the researcher plans to measure collaborative effectiveness of the distant teams.

Cycle questions that might evolve should be specific to the actions taken and the outcomes that will be monitored and measured:

*If I introduce Google documents to share data and increase coordination, to what extent will the teams use this means of storing information to coordinate data to facilitate data-driven decision making?*

A second cycle question that might follow when it is clear that teams failed to use the shared document tool as effectively as the researcher had hoped:

*How will making all day support available on instant messenger for questions about the uses and organization of shared documents organize group work?*

## Recognizing Weak Action Research Questions

- **Questions with known answers where the goal is to "prove" it to others**

For example, suppose a person has been holding family math night for years and sees an effect on parent participation. A weak question for action research would be: Will holding a family math night increase parent participation? This might be a useful evaluative research question where a study could be set up to explore the connection. But evaluative research is different than action research. Action research is inquiry with the goal of deeper understanding, and involves implementing an action with the intention to learn from the consequences.

- **Questions that can be answered yes or no.**

Generally these are questions that will not encourage paying attention to the many nuances of the setting and the social interactions. While some yes/no questions can provide direction, it is often helpful to think about ways to transform the question into a different format. For example: *Will the introduction of project-based learning lead to more student engagement?* The question might be reworked to, *How will the introduction of project-based learning affect student engagement in my classroom?* The first one, the researcher can answer the question with yes (an outcome that they might already be able to predict). The second question guides them to look for the possible mechanism of project-based learning (maybe ownership, collaboration, or self-assessment) that have been found to be related to increased engagement.

- **Questions that can be answered by reading the literature.**

For example, consider a definitional question like: *What does community of practice mean?* might be a question that the researcher needs to answer. This question can be answered by reading more readily than by engaging in action research. A better formulation for action research might be: *How will increasing the time for teacher collaboration in grade level teams affect the development of a community of practice at our school?*

## Sharing Action Research

One of the strongest acts of leadership can be the act of writing—of sharing knowledge and insights gained. Writing enables contribution to the body of knowledge that exists beyond the researcher. The final report serves the purpose of sharing the knowledge gained through action research with others in a community of practice. Action researchers will need to decide what to write and to whom to write, and with whom to write. Involving participants in writing is an important way for everyone to reflect more deeply on what is being learned.

### A Written Report

The following is the recommended template for the Master of Arts in Learning Technologies thesis for Pepperdine students. However, there are multiple ways that an action research report may be organized.

#### INTRODUCTION:

The significance of the problem you are addressing. The reader needs to be invited to think about the problem at the widest level. This should answer the question—Why should I read this; why should I care about this study? This is not about the context but about the problem and how it is linked to your vision for a different future.

#### THE CONTEXT:

##### WORK/COMMUNITY CONTEXT (Action context)—

Once you have posed a problem at a general level, you will need to provide the context of your work. There are two parts to this. One, is the local context (this section,) and the other, is the professional context (review of literature). These can come in whatever order makes sense to you. In your local context, you may want to describe your membership/position in your community of practice, as well as how you have previously tried to address the problem described.

##### LITERATURE REVIEW (research context)—

The literature is another way to set the context for your work. What previous work informs your understanding of the problem? What theories or predictions about outcomes come

from past studies? How is what you plan to do similar or different from what others have tried?

#### THE RESEARCH:

##### RESEARCH QUESTION—

The research question sets up your inquiry. The inquiry question is the overarching problem selected. The cycles questions are sub-questions that helped address this larger issue in different ways.

##### REPORT OF CYCLES OF RESEARCH—

Action research takes place in cycles. Each cycle is a discrete experiment—taking action as a way of studying change. Your report needs to include either a detailed report for each cycle as follows or a report of the cycles in a more summary format.

**DESCRIPTION OF CYCLE ACTION:** Description of what was planned and why this is seen as an effective change. Might include some guesses about what will happen.

**CYCLE RESEARCH QUESTION:** A strong question sets out both the action and expected reactions. The first part of the question clearly states what you will do in very specific language. The second part shares your best guess at an outcome. (The reactions of others that you expect to result from your action.) Your action research is a design experiment. You are designing with an eye toward a deeper understanding of change.

**DESCRIPTION OF WHAT HAPPENED:** Brief description of what took place.

**EVIDENCE USED TO EVALUATE THE ACTION:** What evidence did you collect to tell you how others respond to your action? Where did you look for direct or indirect evidence of what happened?

**EVALUATION:** How will you/did you evaluate the outcomes of your action?..... (Indicate your plans for your analysis in a paragraph or two).

**REFLECTION:** Looking back on your action after collecting data, what thoughts come to mind? If you were to repeat the process, what would you change? What worked best for you? What most surprised you?

#### FINAL REFLECTION:

Here is where you will take stock of your overall learning process during your action research. It might be helpful to think of a reflection as a set of connections between the past, present and future. If this section is only a summary of events that happened, it is inadequate as a reflection. A reflection provides a deep understanding of why events occurred as they did, and how those outcomes helped you address your overarching question. At the conclusion of a good reflection, you should ideally know more than you did when you began. If you have not gained new insights about the problem and your problem-solving action, it is likely that you are only summarizing. Reflection is a powerful learning experience and an essential part of action research.

#### REFERENCES:

The references provide the context for your ideas. In many ways, the references indicate the community of researchers and writers that you are writing for. (See the [CCAR Tutorials](#) for detailed suggestions for each of these phases of action research.)

### **Publishing a Web Portfolio:**

An important part of the action research process is sharing artifacts of the inquiry to enable the action researcher to continually reflect on practice so that peers may contribute feedback and support. The Web Portfolio, then, becomes a place for both internal and external reflection.

A good action research portfolio, like a report, documents practices at each step of the inquiry. The accumulation of content provides critical mass for reflection and for recognizing change in practice. There is no perfect template for an action research portfolio. One key idea, however, is to be sure to document each cycle and gather artifacts accordingly. That documentation process should utilize both descriptive and reflective writing.

The Center for Collaborative Action Research has collected action research portfolios that serve as effective models. The model portfolios are categorized into two groups: [School Action Research](#) for projects that help improve instructional practices and [Community Action Research](#) for projects in university, corporate, and other community settings.

In general, your portfolio might include, but is not limited to the following:

- An overview of your problem at a general level and why you (and others) see this as an important challenge and some hints about what you did to solve it- this opening page should be engaging with photos, graphics and possibly a video or audio intro from you
- A description of the problem that you are researching with an action to be taken
- A detailed description of the field of action (the action context)
- A review of literature as part of a planning process (the research context)
- The action research question(s)
- The action research process described briefly
- Cycle Reports that document the activity across multiple efforts of change including
  - data collected
  - details of the analysis process
  - cycle reflections
- Your final reflection considering what was learned across all of the cycles about yourself, your actions, your context and the process.
- Collection of any artifacts, images, and videos, or research blogs that you wish to include
- Professional bio

This review of collaborative action research provides a context to review the reports that are contained on this site. If you are interested in learning more about, or teaching collaborative action research research, the [CCAR Action Research Tutorials](#) provides videos, resources, activities, and ideas.

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