

Action Research SWRK 743

University of Pennsylvania - School of Social Policy and Practice

Instructor:

Email:

Course Overview

Action Research is a research methodology that combines research with intervention or 'action.' It is characterized by a collaborative relationship between the researcher and an organization or community that perceives an issue of concern. The research/action can be to further define or understand the problem, to intervene, or to advocate for specific solutions. The course will be taught in a manner that is consistent with the principles of Action Research, with a focus on collaborative learning. In this course, we will:

- Review the process, principles, and epistemological underpinnings of Action Research;
- Develop skills needed to work as an action and participation-oriented researcher;
- Talk about power in the research process;
- Analyze case studies;
- Discuss issues of quality and rigor;
- Critique the limits of conventional methods of evidence based research;
- Examine the relevance and application of Action Research to the field of social work;
- Carry out at least the initial steps of an action research project.

Required Texts

Stringer, E.T. (2007). Action Research 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

All other required readings are available on CANVAS. Other readings of interest may be distributed in class by instructor or students. The course has changed over the years, reading added, readings retired, based on student contributions.

Readings

Most weeks, students will be asked to write a paragraph about the key arguments from that week's assigned readings, as well as questions they have about those readings. These written reflections/questions will help form the basis for class discussion.

In addition, once during the semester, students will be asked to verbally present the key issues from a particular week's readings and to lead the class in a discussion about those readings. This will be done in pairs.

Course Assignments

Assignment 1: (8 pages, double spaced) - Due Week 4

The purpose of this assignment is to provoke your thinking about how research is conducted in your field, and how that research relates to the people (communities, clients, service providers) who serve as its subjects. It consists of two steps.

Step 1. Identify one or two seminal works of research in your field (area of interest). You likely know what these are from assignments in your practice and policy related courses. These should be studies that are in the peer-reviewed academic and professional journals that are frequently cited by academics and practitioners. Review these studies with an eye for the following, and in the first part of your paper, address:

- What are the key concepts that shape the researchers' analysis?

- What is the unit of analysis used by the researchers?
- How do these concepts and the decision about unit of analysis create a conceptual framework for understanding the problem issue being studied?
- How do they shape the approach (the research process)?
- How do they shape the conclusions and stated implications?

Step 2. Identify a stakeholder in your area of interest who does not identify her/himself as a researcher. This can be an advocate, a community leader, a client. It could be a group. Have a conversation with the stakeholder about the same topic addressed by the research you described in Step/part 1 of this paper (without telling them what your selected research writings said). Allow the stakeholder to conceptualize the same issue in their terms. Take note of their conceptualization of the issues/problems using the same questions we used for the research articles. At the end of this conversation, introduce the research. The stakeholder may already know about it. Have a conversation about how the research perspective and the stakeholder perspective may be similar or different on the same issue. In part 2 of your paper, address the following:

- What are the similarities and differences in perspectives, or frameworks for understanding?
- How are these shaped by similarities or differences in concepts or units of analysis?
- What voices or ideas were heard in the stakeholder interview that you did not hear in the research? What are the relative contributions of both perspectives?
- To what extent do they complement one another?
- To what extent do they challenge one another?

Assignment 2: Getting to know people and context (5 pages, double spaced) - Due Week 7

In this assignment, you will engage a *group* (3 or more individuals) representing a community/organization in your area of interest and with whom you would (ideally) like to work with on an action research project (or at least help them think about and draft a plan for one). You will *facilitate a group discussion* with them using similar questions as you used in your first assignment with the one stakeholder, but with the goal of identifying a common problem or issue of concern that they would (ideally) like to address (more details will be discussed in class). The stakeholder you interviewed in the first assignment should be able to introduce you to a group of staff/clients/members with whom you can conduct this group interview.

The community or organization can be a geographic community (i.e., neighborhood); an organizational community (i.e., a social service agency, a community group, an advocacy group); or it may be a community of identity (i.e., substance users who refuse treatment).

You will need to meet with this group at least once to begin to define of an issue of concern in order to complete this assignment. In your paper answer the following questions:

- How do you define the community that you engaged?
- How did you gain access to stakeholders, leaders and/or members of this community?
- What procedures do you use to gather information for this assignment (in addition to interviewing)?
- What are the broad issues impacting this community or that they are engaged in (that they articulated and/or that you learned about from other sources)?
- Did you identify any issues of common concern (that could be potential action research topics)?
- What's the history of these topics/what's the context?
- To what extent has your initial idea of these topics changed based on your group conversation?

- What are the tensions identified by the community within these topics? And what do you learn from these tensions?

Assignment 3: Defining the issue (1 page) - Due Week 9

Defining the problem/issue with your stakeholders. Based on your (at least two) interviews (with the first individual stakeholder and with the group), as well as any other additional conversations you have had with them, and additional research and thinking, come up with a succinct statement of a problem confronted by the community. The last line of this page should be a focused question that can serve to guide the project.

Assignment 4: Plan of action. (8 pages, double spaced)- Due Week 14

Option 1: If the action to be taken is to understand the issue further, design a collaborative research project. Define the issue being addressed, the question/s to be studied, and the specific research methods to be used (surveys, interviews, observation, photo journaling, etc.). This should have all the elements of a research proposal and should include specific plans for collaboration (between you as researcher and the stakeholders). What might be some barriers to collaboration, and how might they be overcome? What will be done with what is learned?

Option 2: If you have already gathered enough information with your co-researchers to plan action, write up an action plan. What is the action to be taken? Who will carry it out? How was the action decided and by whom? What barriers to collaboration were encountered in the process (of deciding on action)? What are the desired results of the proposed action? How will the action be evaluated? How will information about the project be disseminated and to whom?

Option 3: If you were able to collaborate with a community to plan and carry out an action, reflect back on the process. How was the issue identified? How was the action determined? What barriers to collaboration were encountered in the process? What was the result of the action taken? How is the action being evaluated/reflected on by the group? Has information about the project been disseminated/are there plans to disseminate information about the project? To whom? What would you do differently?

Assignment 5: Presentation- Due Week 13 or Week 14

During one of the last two classes of the semester, you will present your project to the class. You will give an outline of the issue and the work done so far on the project, answer questions, discuss lessons learned, and ask your classmates to help you with any tricky practical, ethical or power-related concerns that have arisen. You may also choose to create some sort of exercise that illustrates an aspect your project.

GRADING Your grade will be determined by:

- 20% from Assignment 1
- 50% assignments 2 through 4 (combined at the end)
- 30% for class participation (attendance, speaking up, final presentation)

All students are expected to be fully engaged in the assignments and be willing to do rewrites for the intrinsic learning experience. Occasionally, by prior agreement with the instructor, the student may rewrite an assignment for an improvement in grade for that assignment. Rewriting an assignment does not guarantee an improved grade. The instructor can review drafts, and will try to return those that are

emailed at least one week prior to the assignment due date in sufficient time to be helpful for the submitted paper.

Course Sessions



Week 1 – January 22nd

Course Overview

- Set expectations for assignments & presentations
- Initial discussion of students' topic interests and how to approach stakeholders
- Begin to plan for presenters and topics in later weeks.





Week 2 – January 29th

What Is Action Research?

- Stringer, Chapters 1 & 2
- Sohng, S. (1996). Participatory research and community organizing. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 23(4), 77-95  .



Week 3 – Feb. 5th

Establishing Contact with the Community

- Stringer, Chapters 3
- Bray, J.N., Lee, J. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection, and meaning making*, Ch. 4 "Forming a collaborative inquiry group," Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 50-69  
- Fine, M., Torre, M.E., Boudin, K., et al. (2001). Participatory Action Research: From within and beyond prison walls. In P. Camic, J.E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association  .
- Student facilitation of reading discussion

Week 4 - Feb. 12th



Gathering Information and Defining the Issue

- Stringer, Chapter 4
- Whitmore, E., McKee, C. (2001). Six street youth who could... In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 396-402  .

Due: Assignment 1

Week 5 – Feb. 19th



Interpreting and Analyzing

- Stringer, Chapter 5
- Bray, J.N., Lee, J. (2000). *Collaborative inquiry in practice: Action, reflection, and meaning making*, Ch. 6 "Making meaning and constructing knowledge," pp. 88-120. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage  .
- Student facilitation of reading discussion

Week 6 – Feb. 26th



Acting

- Stringer, Chapter 6

- Brydon-Miller, M. (1993). Breaking down barriers: Accessibility self-advocacy in the disabled community. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson (Eds.), *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 125-43  .

Week 7 – March 5th

Accepting Complexity



- Stringer, Chapter 7
- Baldwin, M. (2001). Working together, learning together: Co-operative inquiry in the development of complex practice by teams of social workers. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 287-92  .

Due: Assignment 2

March 12th – No Class, Spring Break





Week 8 – March 19th

Analyzing and Disseminating

- Stringer, Chapter 8
- Horton, B.D. (1993). The Appalachian Land Ownership Study: Research and action in Appalachia. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson (Eds.), *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 85-102  .
- Student facilitation of reading discussion

Week 9 – March 26th

Power: Why Action Research revisited



- Stringer, Chapter 9
- Maguire, P (2001). Uneven ground: Feminisms and Action Research. In P. Reason and H. Bradbury, Eds. *Handbook of Action Research: Participatory inquiry and practice*. New York: Sage, pp. 59-69  .
- Gaventa, J. (1993). The powerful, the powerless, and the experts: Knowledge struggles in the information age. In P. Park, M. Brydon-Miller, B. Hall, T. Jackson, Eds. *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, pp. 21-40  .

Due: Assignment 3

The following weeks are a combination of discussion of assigned readings, topical readings that the instructor or students will suggest (some already included on Canvas), and possibly guest lecturers from experts from the field, as well as discussion of student projects and (in the final two sessions) student presentations of projects.



Week 10 – April 2nd

Examining Action Research Case Studies

- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapters 3-5 (p. 52-103)
- Castleden, et al “Modifying Photovoice for community-based participatory Indigenous research” *Social Science & Medicine* 66 (2008) 1393e1405  
- Guest Speaker: Dr. Corey Shdaimah, University of Maryland School of Social Work

Week 11 – April 9th

Examining Action Research Case Studies

- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapter 6 (p. 104-119)
- Cannuscio, et al “Visual epidemiology: Photographs as tools for probing street-level etiologies” *Social Science & Medicine* 69 (2009) 553–564  
- “Pushed Out: Youth Voices on the Dropout Crisis in Philadelphia” (2011). Youth United for Change - read at <http://youthunitedforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/pushed-out.pdf>

Week 12 – April 16

The Challenge and Promise of Collaborative Research

- Shdaimah, et al (2011) *Change Research* Chapters 7-8 (p.120-171)
- Student facilitation of reading discussion

Week 13 –April 23rd

- 5 Student presentations
- Readings provided by students on their topics.

Week 14 – April 30th

- 5 Student presentations
- Readings provided by students on their topics.
- Debrief class experience

Due: Assignment 4 (paper)