

The Role of Action Research in On-the-job Teacher Training Programs

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Abstract: Increased research in teacher thinking, together with, increased attention to theories proposed on teacher actions during last two decades have led to the proposed "thoughtful agent" as a new idea in teacher training. An outcome of this idea has been the use of such other phrases like "action research", "thoughtful teaching", "think about action", and "teacher as researcher". These changes have resulted into research approaches taking a dominating rule in teacher training all over the world. Action research has been successfully applied in research activities and curriculum planning in teacher education. Action research has been progressively instrumental in introducing higher quality and improved effectiveness in teacher training activities because of its special properties and advantages. Teacher training programs can be designed with the emphasis on action research in preparatory and on-the-job training programs to encourage thoughtful actions among teachers.

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What Is Action Research

Action research means applying research findings to solving practical problems in social situations with the objective to improve performance in the process of a given act with the cooperation and participation of researchers, practitioners, and non-research individuals.

Kemiss & Grundy defined action research in education as certain activities involving curriculum planning, professional advancement, school program improvement, system programing, and policymaking selected as the implemented strategy actions targeted for observation, study, and change. Participants in this process should be actively involved in those activities.

New definitions of action research consider social-educational aspects: "Action research is a type of research undertaken by individuals who are involved in social-educational situations. The objective of action research is to promote improved logic, social justice, and understanding of current situation in individuals who are involved. The best approach for action research is to engage all individuals in the research groups who have the authority and influence on implementing the research findings".

Action Research Characteristics

Action research has four main characteristics:

1- Action research is situation dependent, e.g., identifying a given problem in a certain situation or attempting to solve a certain problem in a given situation or industry.

2- Action research requires cooperation of skilled researchers and practitioners.

3- Action research directly involves group members in the research process.

4- Action research is self-evaluating where improvement and changes implemented during research process are subject to continuous evaluation.

Action Research Approaches

Kurt Lewin was the person who first coined the term "action research" and defined it as a "research consisting of four steps of planning, action, observation, and fact-finding taking place in a repetitive spiral format".

The understanding gained through observation and fact-finding shall lead to improved action, planning, and re-action, repeated many times over in a continuous cycle.

Action research steps

Action research can be summarized in three steps:

- a) Identification
- b) Action
- c) Evaluation and presentation

Action research can be explained in details as follows:

1) Problem identification: the given situation under study is clearly explained. Therefore, it is necessary that the scope and characteristics of the situation are identified and described. The research questions should be documented after careful study, interviewing teachers, and discussions with researchers, consultants, and other relevant individuals.

2) Information gathering: discussion with colleagues and information collection using scientific approaches are instrumental in considering all aspects of a given problem and finding the appropriate solution. A flexible and cooperating attitude can be helpful in carrying discussions with colleagues and practitioners.

3) Selection of a preliminary or proposed solution, or a plan for action: upon completion of data collection and discussions with colleagues and experts, a proper solution is selected and proposed as an action plan.

4) Experimentation or implementation of selected action: The proposed plan is actually implemented and evaluated. The implementation details and their results are carefully and continuously studied. The following tools can be used for the collection of data that is necessary for evaluation of actions during implementation: (a) questionnaire, (b) teacher daily notes, (c) interviews, and (d) observation forms.

In addition to these tools, colleagues, experts, and student parents can help teachers in evaluating their actions during implementation and experimentation.

5) Data analysis and evaluation of results: collected data is analyzed and evaluated using quantitative and qualitative approaches.

6) Planning and re-action: The information obtained from the implementation phase is used for planning and re-action. Action research continues during re-action process until positive results are obtained.

Action research process may not follow the steps in the order mentioned because of its fluidity and flexibility. The criteria for success in action research are not the order of the steps. Its success, rather, depends on reaching a deep understanding on own experiences and the situation those experiences are obtained from. Those individuals who are actively involved in action research should come to believe that their actions and experiences are improved and developed as the result of the process.

Action Research Outcomes and Advantages

Action research activities have two main objectives: a) getting involved and becoming a part of research, and b) improving the situation. Achieving these two objectives creates a motivation for research with a high level of acceptance.

Action research has other objectives and advantages especially in group or shared action research. Action research can be divided into three groups depending on its scope and outcomes:

- a) Teacher as researcher, where teacher focuses on introducing changes to a certain class;
- b) Shared action research, where emphasis is on changes for a group of classes, for example all grade 2 classes; and

c) School wide action research, where everyone in a certain school gets involved and is a more encompassing form of shared action research.

Educational practitioners especially teachers can learn more about their responsibilities and increase their efforts, if they seriously look into the related problems. Performance improves when teachers share experiences they gain on teaching-learning process and have opportunity to interact with their colleagues.

Outcomes become more practicable when teachers participate in action research. Teachers who study their own works become more independent decision makers and therefore, make better decisions. A participating teacher develops a feeling of ownership on research outcome.

Action research helps teachers to grow during research activities and turn into problem solving individuals, which creates a suitable atmosphere to promote innovation.

Kemiss offered following advantages for action research:

1. Shared action research helps teachers learn how to become peer-reviewing colleagues through experimentation and practice.
2. Shared action research helps teachers gain a better understanding of their actions in real teaching situations and discover ways to improve them.
3. Shared action research helps individuals discover themselves and gain freedom from socially imposed unjustifiable, non-productive, inequitable, unfair, and unfeasible barriers or limitations. Action research is a learning process that produces real and actual change.

Definition of On-the-job Training

On-the-job training - unlike traditional education - deals with adults who are required to acquire certain knowledge or skills because of their professional or personal needs.

On-the-job training should be problem-oriented. The content of training course and the approach used for training should meet individuals' professional or personal needs and help them solve the problems they face in their lives or work environment.

With these assumptions, on-the-job training can be defined as "Continuous improvement in knowledge, skills, and behaviors of workers in their work environment". The objective of on-the-job training program is to create additional capabilities, improved efficiency, and higher production in present jobs of participants and create suitable conditions for promotion to higher positions.

Pearo Guter defined on-the-job training as "systematic attempt to coordinate future wishes, desires, and needs of individuals with future needs of

organization in the form of works expected from those individuals".

The main objective of on-the-job training programs in an organization is to increase employee productivity and their adaptability to the work environment through a problem solving approach that ultimately produces higher employee contribution.

Objectives of On-the-job Training

- 1- To increase professional abilities and develop potential capabilities for performing daily responsibilities;
- 2- To prepare employees to accept new responsibilities;
- 3- To increase knowledge base among organizational and training personnel;
- 4- To increase professional skill levels among organizational and training personnel;
- 5- To establish desirable employee behavior conforming to acceptable social values;
- 6- To increase job satisfaction and improve employee moral;
- 7- To increase employee flexibility in a) accepting new and innovative approaches, b) using new tools and facilities, and c) welcoming organizational changes;
- 8- To create employee cooperation toward realization of organizational objectives;
- 9- To develop an environment for a) effective utilization of human resources, b) implementation of organizational policies, and c) achieving organizational objectives; and
- 10- to update human resource knowledge base in educational system to increase knowledge and promote innovation.

The emphasis on any of these objectives may vary depending on the current conditions. This means that the focus on certain objectives may be higher in certain cases.

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