

Leap's Action Research Model: A Discussion paper September 2009

Features of action research

Action research is not itself a research methodology or a specific set of research methods, but rather an approach to inquiry.

The fundamental aim of action research is to **improve practice**. The emphasis is on the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it. Its purpose is to feed practical judgements in concrete situations, by using data as a basis for reflectively improving practice. The focus is on the quality of the inquiry, developing understanding and resonance. The validity of theories or hypotheses it generates depends on their usefulness in helping people to act intelligently and skilfully.

Action research practice draws on a wide field of influence, including critical thinking, liberationist thought, and feminist ethics. The emphasis is on **collaboration** between all those involved in the inquiry, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied. Action research is conducted *by, with and for* people, rather than research on people. It has been described as:

"a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. . . . It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities". (Reason & Bradbury, 2001)

This quote highlights a good way to think about the difference between an action research approach and traditional social research, which highlights dialogue, collaboration, values and action:

'The point of (action) research is to talk to each other about what we ought to be doing'.

- Leap young people are not the 'subject' to be researched but rather are actively engaged and participating in the process, and therefore informing and influencing the direction of the programme.

The term 'action research' covers a wide range of approaches including co-operative inquiry, participatory action research, systemic action research, action science, action inquiry and appreciative inquiry. Common to all these variants is the starting point of a good open inquiry question. This is a question that has no obvious or immediate answers but which is a genuine inquiry that has energy and importance to those involved.

- Leap's Action Research programmes work in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people. We are seeking answers to questions which have yet to be adequately answered about Youth and Conflict. For example, the central question at the heart of the Crossing Frontlines Programme is 'How can we support young people in negotiating the

¹ This is a paraphrase of Richard Rorty 1999, *Philosophy and social hope*. London: Penguin Books.

complex issues of identity, belonging, and place?’ This question also encompasses issues of faith and ethnicity, territory and group / gang allegiance, and young people’s role in communities – community breakers or community makers.

The term ‘action research’ is widely used and sometimes misapplied: often it simply refers to research that is undertaken to inform (later) action. This is really a form of applied research. Genuine action research is more embedded in the action – it works through cycles of action and reflection to test out emerging learning in ‘real time’. The research and action components become intertwined. This means that the usual more formal distinctions between different phases of a programme (needs analysis, programme design, pilot implementation, evaluation, dissemination) can become blurred. New information gathered along the way is absorbed and reflected in how the emerging action is then adapted. Action research is often described as ‘emergent’, in that outcomes are not necessarily predictable or known. They can be emergent and uncertain; the process is flexible and is more about the principles of the approach.

- Leap’s Action Research programmes develop new metaphors, frameworks and materials through a process of trialling, evaluating and adaptation. Experiencing what works and doesn’t work in different contexts with different groups of young people is treated as valuable learning rather than as a block to implementation and materials are adapted accordingly. However, Leap programmes do have very clear expected outcomes and outputs. It is important in Leap’s specified Action Research programmes that if anticipated outcomes are not achieved, that in itself, is seen as part of the learning and inquired into, so that a new direction, or new way of doing things can emerge. Within Action Research programme we need to hold onto the idea of ‘uncertainty’ and ‘order’ being part of the same cycle and not be hampered by a (often necessary for funding) commitment to very specific predefined outcomes. So it may feel at times that the programme gets bogged down or stuck or there may be a tension between agreed outcomes and emerging learning. These times need to be approached by all as essentially fruitful, as they can often herald some radical new learning or breakthrough.

Action Research does not privilege certain types of knowledge. Instead it recognises different forms of evidence. So for example the kind of knowledge that draws on concepts and ideas and includes formal explicit, objective, ‘scientific’ evidence (Propositional) does not have more value than knowledge which is gained through practice (Practical), knowledge gained through expression – arts, storytelling etc (Expression), or knowledge gained through experience (Experiential). Action Research draws on all these four ways of knowing.

- Leap’s Action Research programmes regularly draw on all four ways of knowing. For example the Gangs and Territorialism drew on desk based research and reading, but also drew on others practice – the delivery team visited other practitioners to gather examples of good practice. The team carried out research with 340 young people hearing their stories, in terms of what it was like for them, how they defined themselves in relation to groups and gangs. The team then delivered three different pilots in three different UK locations, the learning from the first feeding into the second and so on – until they had developed innovative frameworks, new language and materials for working with young people in gangs.
- Even Leap projects which seem to be concerned mainly with delivery can have an element of Action Research about them. For example the Sports Relief programme’s aim has principally been work with 9 projects across the UK developing the capacity of staff in Conflict skills so that they can incorporate those skills into Sports programmes addressing issues of community conflict, such as territory, ethnicity and sectarianism. Because Leap generally fosters a culture of Action Research it has resulted in an inquiry about the role of Sport more generally in working with young people in conflict, and the development of a tool for professionals wanting to understand which sports might foster the development of CR skills in young people.

Systemic action research seeks to achieve holistic change in complex social and organisational settings through processes of multiple strands of inquiry - in-depth inquiry, multi-stakeholder analysis, experimental action and experiential learning enacted across a wide terrain. The notion of boundary critique is also important in systemic action research; how the boundaries of inquiry are framed has a profound impact on what we can learn. We know that actions and interventions in one sphere can have major implications in others, yet it is not always easy to see wider systemic patterns from within a tightly bounded local problem context. This approach raises some interesting challenges for Leap.

- In Crossing Frontlines the three pilot programmes are all pursuing related but different lines of inquiry: *Fear and Fashion* is inquiring into issues of weapon carrying, individual and community safety, territory, status and reputation. *Preventing Racist Violence* is inquiring into issues of identity, race, and belonging particularly in relation to young white working class men. *Leadership and Reconciliation* is inquiring into the role of young people in communities and intergenerational relationships. One of the issues for the programme is the tendency to tackle issues in isolation from others; projects are not brought together and wider stakeholders are not integral to the inquiry.
- The learning from the separate lines of inquiry will help to direct the next stage of Action Research at Leap. At this stage they may be discontinued as separate strands but will have help to inform ongoing work. Projects which support this are the *Identity and Prejudice* work developed to help youth work professionals challenged by these issues with young people, and the *Sports and Conflict* programme, which is also dealing with issues of territory, ethnicity and belonging.

Implications for Leap

Action Research is a fundamental strand of Leap's culture and many of its defining features are already present in much of Leap's delivery work. As a self-proclaimed 'Action Research based' organisation we must continually seek to embrace every opportunity to strengthen our learning, question the boundaries and equip ourselves to better engage with the complexities of the world in which we work.

Part of the role of the Leap Academy of Youth Conflict is to make the Action Research strand of Leap's culture more visible: by articulating it more clearly and loudly, by systematising the approach through running regular learning seminars, and ensuring that the results of both the formally recognised Action Research programmes, and the learning from other pieces of work not formally designated as Action Research but which take an Action Research approach, are disseminated more widely externally.

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