CELEBRATING SUCCESS WITH ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Teaching Action Research is rewarding, but when the instructor can simply the tools for the students in formulating the background and statement of the problem, the specific purpose of the research, the research question, and in turn, design the action research plan or design that can answer the research question that aligns with the specific purpose, the instructor will receive a "thank you" from many gratified students. The rationale and statement of the problem behind doing this paper is that in the author's department, many Master Degree candidates were not completing their Action Research projects. The percentage of completion hovered around 33%. This was alarming to the department chair and full time faculty who felt the reputation of National University was suffering. There is a basic premise of National University that it is a "University of Values" that just received glowing reviews from the WASC Accreditation Team. The theory to be explored will be the constructivist method of instruction and the illustration of a cohesive alignment of specific components of Action Research will be explained in order for candidates to successfully complete an Action Research project in a timely manner. Outcomes of the presentation include: 1) participants awareness that Action Research is a method that can benefit an entire community, 2) points for successful instruction to candidates who wish to complete an Action Research project and 3) why it is so important to see students through to completion of the project.

Rationale

Many graduate students find themselves in a difficult negotiating position after graduation if they don't have a master's degree to market themselves competitively in our struggling global economy! The purpose of this paper is to provide the tools to graduate students and faculty to complete their action research projects and earn the coveted Master's Degree from a highly acclaimed university, National University that just

received 10 year accreditation from WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) in the United States of America. When a candidate can enrich his/her earning potential, the entire community benefits and the candidate earns the right to participate in a higher echelon of a scholarly niche.

Theoretical Framework

The Constructivist theory suggests "hands-on" learning to be the most effective for students learning a new concept. Even though graduate students have successfully completed lower division degrees, many come to the table not even know what Action Research is! "Action Research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principles, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment....This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved" (Mills, 2011,p.5).

In *The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*, Brooks & Brooks (1999) claim that, "The teacher's responsibility is to create educational environments that permit students to assume the responsibility that is rightfully and naturally theirs. Teachers do this by encouraging self-initiated inquiry, providing the materials and supplies appropriate for the learning tasks, and sensitively mediating teacher/student and student/student interactions" (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 49). In other words, faculty needs to provide

graduate students the tools needed to create and complete an action research project! This will result in a larger percentage of completion in a shorter period of time which provides a positive outcome, not only for the candidate, but for the institution of higher learning as well.

Teaching action research can also be based on the induction theory …"in the history of scientific research emerged the inductive method of acquiring knowledge. Frances Bacon suggested that by precise observation of phenomena one might arrive at generalizations or new knowledge from the evidence gained from separate and specific observations" (Jones, 1973, p.4). In the case of Action Research, observation is one data collection method to apply to an ethnographic study to obtain new information and/or solution to a need and answer the problem the need creates. Using specific tools to break down the vital components for a successfully action research project can emulate the use of specific to general. In other words, breaking down the project into specific components helps the candidate to see the entire project come together seamlessly.

Presentation Outcomes

The purpose of this paper and ensuing presentation is threefold: 1) participants' awareness that Action Research is a method that can benefit an entire community, 2) points for successful instruction to candidates who wish to complete an Action Research project and 3) why it is so important to see students through to completion of the project. The second point will be the emphasis of this paper and the presentation.

Tools for Teaching Action Research

For the past six years, this researcher has taught Action Research class both online and on ground. Invariably, master degree candidates come to class without a clue as to what constitutes action research. The prerequisite class is ILD 625, Educational Research Methods, which only touches lightly on statistics and what constitutes action research. Mills (2011), *A Guide for the Teacher Researcher*, is an excellent resource to guide the candidates toward completion. Action research is a clear-cut ethnographic study looking to solve a problem that will benefit an educational community. "The first approach to, and contact with, a cultural group or community can be the single most important act in a program of research: how can it be done with sensitivity and without major gaffes?" (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002, p. 234). In other words, the classroom is a community, the teacher is often the researcher, and the students reap the ultimate benefit!

How does this researcher guide the candidates to a topic that will ultimately produce viable data collection methods based on an appropriate research question? It all hinders on the use of appropriate "tools" used by the candidate/researcher that are provided by the facilitator known as the instructor.

First the instructor asks the candidates what is a major problem they wish to solve in their educational community? The candidates ruminate on the question and ultimately come up with an issue they wish to tackle.

The next step then is for them to create a statement of need connected to the problem. After all, there is a definite need of some sort, if in fact, there is a problem needing to be solved! Once their statement of need/problem is constructed then the purpose is crafted. The purpose will ultimately "solve the problem"!

The easiest, and one this research believes is most often overlooked, is the fact that the purpose can be inverted to create a question and voila, the research question is in place! In all research circles, a well constructed research question drives methodology. In other words, what data collection methods will be used to answer the research question? Certainly data collection methods must be triangulated in action research in order to avoid a biased study. According to Mills (2011), triangulation is the use of multiple sources of data. When thinking of specific data collection methods to use to answer the research question Mills (2011), divides them into categories: *experiencing*, through observation and field notes, *enquiring*, when the researcher asks, and examining, using and making records (p. 89).

Candidates often fail to understand the concept of a literature review. Often a "report" is produced on the topic, but this fails to meet the criteria of a literature review. "The review of the literature should be clear to the evaluator". It must "show relations among the items reviewed as well as relation to the total project" (Jones, 1973, p. 407). This research asks candidates the following question, "What other studies are out there (in the literature) that provides empirical data on your topic (Keough, 2011). Often candidates complain "there is nothing out there" or that no other studies have been done in their area. Certainly "grey" areas in empirical data can exist! According to Jones (1973), "The only way a grey area can be identified and an appropriate study built is through an examination of existing studies upon a particular topic" (p. 37).

Once the candidate has designed their methodology, based on the research question, the action research design is presented in Chapter 3 of the proposal. The biggest stumbling block students have is designing a plan that uses data collection methods that

are pertinent to the study which includes those that are specific and concrete. Simply stating that non-verbal, students who are moderately to severely disabled, “point to a correct picture” is insufficient to determine whether there is specific or concrete data collected. Was there baseline data collected to determine a point of reference? Did the student with the disability have 3 out of 4 trials for success? What was the method for recording the data and how will the data be analyzed? Often a data collection matrix to show the action research design in a concrete matter is one solution to the problem of a relevant research design. See appendix A for an example matrix for triangulation of data.

Ultimately, for a complete action research paper, Chapters 4 and 5 will result in an analysis of the data collection that in turn, answers the research question that offers a solution to the problem/need originally stated. Chapter 5 offers conclusions and what other research may be needed in the future.

As stated earlier, one of the needs of the Department of Special Education at National University, USA, was that only about one-third of all graduate students were completing their action research projects resulting in a Master’s Degree. After consulting with department faculty, it was determined that as long as the candidate completed a rigorous, informed, well research literature review, a physical data collection could be eliminated. In other words, candidates would write chapters one through four and eliminate the writing of Chapter 5, since no physical data collection would occur. This change in requirement, known as “Option 2”, has been met with not only favor from the candidate, but an increase in the completion rate of students completing the Action Research course. As evidence, this researcher has accomplished a 77% completion rate for the last online course taught January/February of 2011. Two students’ papers are still under review by

the department chair, but the students did actually complete the project. See appendix B for a graphic the student results.

Conclusion

Teaching the course known as Action Research is rewarding and gratifying when students can complete their projects with success. This success is due to the simplification of the process by giving candidates specific tools to guide them through the intricate process of identifying a need/problem and making a concrete statement about the problem which forms the study's purpose. Once the purpose is determined, it can be reversed to form the research question to answer the need or statement of the problem. The research question drives the methodology, which determines the action research design, that must consist of triangulated data collection methods to ensure the study is not biased. In order to make certain that data collection methods are specific and concrete a data collection matrix is configured to offer a visual of the action research design.

The acceptance of an "Option A" plan for candidates to succeed has increased the completion rate from 33% to 77% in this researcher's class.

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Appendix A

Importance and Example Matrix: Triangulation of Data

R.Q: Effectiveness of Graphic Organizers	**Data Source**
1. Prior knowledge:	Pre- tests
2. Graphic Organizer as variable:	Observation/field notes
3. Success of Intervention	Post test
4. User friendly for: teachers	Surveys/interviews

Appendix B

Use of synthesis of "tools" to teach Action Research

***Statistical*: N=9**

- ***7 completed Opt. 2* successfully***
- ***2 failed to receive dept. chair approval but did complete***

Conclusion: 77% completed AR with "S" in a 2 month parameter

***Option 2: SPED has chosen to allow candidates to write 4 chapters with heavy reliance on min. 20 peer reviewed journal articles as Lit. Rev. with no submission to IRB in 2 months time.**

***Option 1: Candidates must write a 3 chapter proposal, submit to IRB, physically collect data after approval and write Chapter 4 & 5 within 1 yr.**

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