

Rationalization of using practical action research method in course development for entrepreneurship training programme

Muhammad Rosni Bin Amir Hussin

Pusat Pengajian Perakaunan Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz School of Accountancy (TISSA-UUM)
College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Kedah Malaysia.

Abstract

It is crucial for each study to justify the use of the action research method in their study. The decision to use action research approach begins with thinking carefully about justifying the choice because the researcher needs to argue the case clearly and cogently. Early justification is very important because action research is a flexible and responsive approach, where each spiral turn is an opportunity to learn, change, critique or improve the methodology. If the researchers are successful in justifying the use of action research, they can improve the research situation, and at the same time, improve their personal and professional skills. This paper will define action research and explain briefly three (3) categories of action research; practical, emancipatory, technical. As the focus, this paper next discusses action research paradigm in the field of entrepreneurship training course development. Finally, this paper will justify the appropriateness of using practical action research method to improve or to develop course for entrepreneurship training programme.

Keywords: practical action research, training, development, entrepreneurs.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is crucial for the study related to course development for entrepreneurship programme to justify the use of the action research (AR) method in their study. According to Dick (2002), the decision to use AR approach begins with thinking carefully about justifying the choice because the researcher needs to argue the case clearly and cogently. Early justification is very important because AR is a flexible and responsive approach, where each spiral turn is an opportunity to learn, change, critique or improve the methodology. If the researchers are successful in justifying the use of AR, they can improve the research situation, and at the same time, improve their personal and professional skills (Dick, 2002; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002).

AR is also known as participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning and contextual AR (O'Brien, 1998). Many studies generally consider Kurt Lewin as the father of AR (Cumming & Worley, 2005; French & Bell, 1999; O'Brien, 1998; Swanson & Holton III, 2005). Lewin first introduced a research paper entitled "AR and Minority Problems" in 1946 (O'Brien, 1998). Lewin was very concerned with the social problems and believed that social problems could be resolved through a spiral process involving various steps, such as planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Lewin also believed that active participation from various stakeholders in the public can address any conflict and crisis, and suggestions how to solve the problem can be made (O'Brien, 1998).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: 0195673126
E-mail: mohdrosni@uum.edu.my

2. DEFINITION OF ACTION RESEARCH

There are various definitions of AR noted in the literature. For instance:
AR is defined as (Hussey and Hussey, 1997):

“A type of applied research designed to find an effective way of bringing changes to the specific organisation, practice or situation.” (Hussey & Hussey, 1997: 65)

French and Bell (1999) define AR as:

“A process of systematically collecting research data about an on-going system relative to some objective, goal, or need of that system; feeding these data back into the system; taking actions by altering selected variables within the system based both on the data and on hypotheses; and evaluating the results of actions by collecting more data.” (French & Bell, 1999: 130)

Checkland and Poulter (2006) define AR as:

“An organized, flexible process for dealing with situations which someone sees as problematic; situations which call for action to be taken to improve them, to make them more acceptable, less full of tensions and unanswered questions.” (Checkland & Poulter, 2006: 4)

Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007) view that it is impossible to arrive at a single, true definition of AR because it depends on many environmental, situational, personal and organisational factors and multiple perspectives. Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007) therefore introduced an effective AR theoretical framework, i.e., the CRASP model, which means:

“Critical (self-critical) collaborative enquiry by Reflective practitioners being Accountable and making the results of their enquiry public; Self-evaluating their practice and engaging in Participative problem solving and continuing professional development”. (Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher, 2007: 416)

McGrath and O’Toole (2012) indicate that:

“AR is intended to advance knowledge and solve problems having a real world effect which can be demanding as researchers are expected to both develop knowledge and work towards positive, practical change”. (McGrath & O’Toole, 2012: 509)

Recently Stringer (2014) postulated AR as:

“A systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. It uses continuing cycles of investigation designed to reveal effective solution to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localised settings, providing the means by which people in schools, businesses, communal agencies and organisations, and health and human services may increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their work.” (Stringer, 2014: 1)

As a summary, Akdere (2003) indicates that AR is important and establishes problem-solving, through action, which aims to formulate knowledge that adds to theories of action to promote learning concerning behavioural systems. Action is focused on improving the situation and research is the conscious effort towards that improvement. Additionally, Akdere (2003) indicates that AR comprises a set of steps that aims to define problems, pursue actions and assess outcomes. Therefore, AR has some components that resemble analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation.

Akdere (2003) discusses the AR paradigm in the field of training and development. The discussion by Akdere (2003) makes a comparison between the AR model by Cummings and Worley’s (2001); and taxonomy of performance model by Swanson (1994). Both models are expected to provide in-depth understanding of training and development as a process that has the potential of developing human expertise required to maintain and change organisations for the purpose of improving performance through training and development (Akdere, 2003). After in-depth analysis, Akdere (2003) concludes that the AR model by Cummings and Worley (2001)

has the potential to serve as a roadmap or guideline, for the training and development of both researchers and practitioners, to improve and develop activities and programmes. Through its problem-solving components and assessment nature, AR offers a unique approach in the field of training and development, to address the challenges that are caused by complex human dynamic interactions, behaviours and learning processes (Akdere, 2005). Finally, Akdere (2003) suggests that the utility of the AR model needs further empirical investigation in order to discover a full spectrum of benefits and implication for the field of training and development.

As suggested by Akdere (2003), below is the AR cycle by Cummings and Worley (2005):

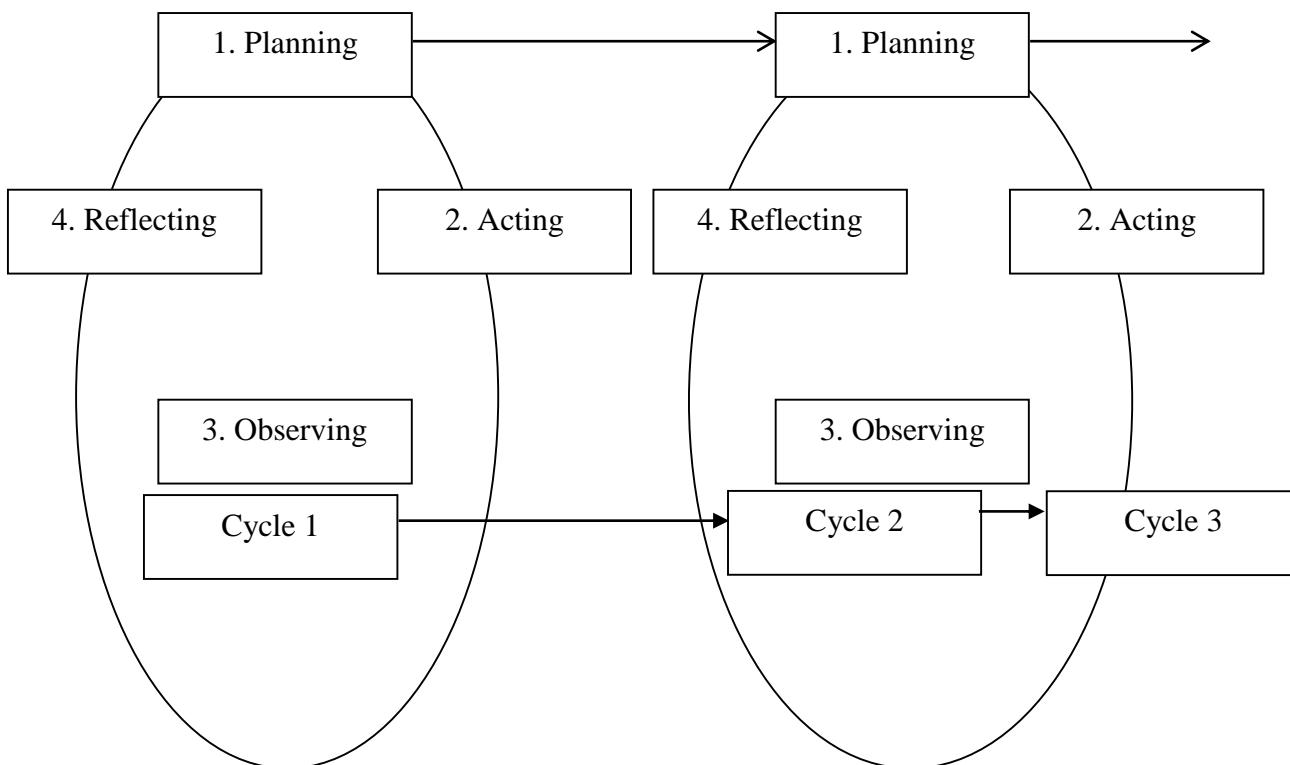


Figure 1
General AR cycle

3.0 TYPES OF ACTION RESEARCH

Carr and Kemmis (2002) explain three categories of AR , based on Habermas (1972) as shown in Table 1; (1) Technical AR; (2) emancipatory AR; and (3) practical AR.

3.1 Technical action research

Table 1.0 indicated that technical AR is designed to test existing research findings regarding their current practice, with the objective of contributing to and expanding the literature. Although technical AR can change the situation or practice to be more efficient and effective, the change is only on paper rather than in practice. The intention of the researcher is to test particular intervention to see how effective it is in solving problems in a specific situation. Further, technical AR has been criticised as being too individualistic, and limiting the researcher's potential in research (Carr & Kemmis, 2002; Lebar, 2014; McGrath & O'Toole, 2012).

3.2 Emancipatory action research

Emancipatory AR as shown in Table 3.1 has been accepted as the best method of critical education science. Emancipatory AR is widely discussed in the literature, such as Grundy (1987); Argyris (1993); Elliot (1991); and Cohen et al. (2000). According to Carr and Kemmis (2002), emancipatory AR can be defined as:

“The practitioners’ group takes joint responsibility for the development of practice, understanding the situation, and sees these as socially-constructed in the interactive processes of educational life.” (Carr & Kemmis, 2002: 203)

Grundy (1987), as cited by Cohen et al. (2000), defines emancipatory AR as:

“Seeks to develop in participants their understandings of illegitimate structural and interpersonal constraints that are preventing the exercise of their autonomy and freedom.” (Grundy, 1987: 146)

From the above definition, emancipatory AR aims not only at improving the self-understanding of practitioners, but also in assisting practitioners to arrive at a critique of their social or educational work or work setting. It is understood that the most critical element in the emancipatory AR is the group of the researchers must be from the system and involved not only in individual critical thinking, but in the common critical view of changing the institution’s practices (Carr & Kemmis, 2002).

Table 1
Type of AR

Philosophical Base	Technical AR Natural Sciences	Practical AR Historical Hermeneutics	Emancipatory/ Participatory AR Critical Sciences
The nature of reality	Single, measurable, fragmental	Multiple, constructed, holistic	Social, economic. Exists with problems of equity and hegemony
Problem	Defined in advance	Defined in situation	Defined in the situation based on values clarification
Relationship between the Knower and Known	Separate	Interrelated, dialogic	Interrelated, embedded in society
Focus of collaboration theory	Technical validation, refinement, deduction	Mutual understanding, new theory, inductive	Mutual emancipation, validation, refinement, new theory, inductive, deductive
Types of knowledge produce	Predictive	Descriptive	Predictive, descriptive
Change duration	Short lived	Longer dependent on individuals	Social change, emancipation
The nature of understanding	Events explained in terms of real causes and simultaneous effects	Events are understood through active mental work, interactions with external context, transactions between one's mental work and external context	Events are understood in terms of social and economic hindrances to true equity
The role of value in research	Value free	Value bounded	Related to values of equity
Purpose research	Discovery of laws underlying reality	Understand what occurs and the meaning people make of phenomena	Uncover and understand what constrains equity and supports hegemony to free oneself of false consciousness and change practice toward more equity

3.3 Practical Action Research

The final type of AR is practical AR. According to Carr and Kemmis (2002), practical AR can be defined as:

“Outside facilitator/s form cooperative relationships with the practitioners, helping them to articulate their own concern, plan strategic action for change, monitor the problems and effect of changes, and reflect the value and consequences of the changes actually achieved”. (Carr & Kemmis, 2002: 203)

Practical AR is the process of understanding the problem and suggesting the solution or providing improvement techniques for the current practice. The consultants (the most appropriate term for researchers in practical AR as indicated by Cornwall, 1996), who are involved in practical AR will develop mutual collaboration with the practitioners to gain a new understanding of their practice and provide changes, solutions or improvement to be implemented (McKernan, 1991).

In practical AR, the consultant sits together with related stakeholders to identify potential problems, their underlying causes and possible interventions or solutions. The understanding process will develop based on mutual understanding from the dialogues conducted. Next, practical AR can improve current practice based on the personal wisdom of the participants. Thus, the communication process between the consultant with the stakeholders must occur smoothly without any disruption (Grundy, 1987; Holter & Schwartz - Barcott, 1993; McGrath & O’Toole, 2012).

Since the objective of the study is to develop training course for entrepreneurship training programme, practical AR is the most appropriate to employed to attain the objective. According to Grundy (1987), practical AR fosters the development of professionalism by emphasising the consultant’s personal judgement to improve current practice of the client. Further, the researcher and the stakeholders collaborate together to identify problems, determine solutions and observe the outcomes. In this kind of study, mutual understanding was developed between the researcher and the training provider institutions and SME owner- managers, through dialogues with the related parties.

Table 2 shows examples of previous studies in the education and training field that have used the practical AR approach. The Table shows that related to course development, practical AR approach has been used widely in formal education, such as to develop course for higher education levels.

Table 2
Previous research on course development using practical AR method

No.	Researcher(s)	Course
1.	Amir Hussin, Alias, & Ismail (2013)	Improving costing skills training course for SME owner-managers’ training programme
1.	Davidson (2011)	Describes teaching ethics in a financial accounting course for the undergraduate students.
2.	Kelliher, Foley & Frampton (2009)	Examine the operationalisation of a small firm’s learning network model within the Ireland Tourism Network (TLN) programme.
3.	Qureshil, Kamal and Wolcott (2009)	Investigate how micro-enterprises can adopt information and communications technology (ICT) to grow and achieve competitiveness.
4.	Botha, Van der Merwe, Bester and Albertyn (2009)	Adult education programme in South Africa.
5.	Hatzakis, Lycett and Serrano (2007)	To improve IS course in higher education.
6.	Riding, Fowell and Levy (1995)	Develop course of computer-mediated communications entitled Elements of Information Management using computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) for undergraduate students of Sheffield University, UK.

According to Dick (2002), a principle to select the research method, apart from qualitative or quantitative approach, is whether the research is "theory driven" or "data driven". Since the study on training course development is qualitative and "data driven", uses the practical AR method is the most appropriate. Gibb (2011) also suggests using practical AR cycle to develop course design is the best method at the present time. Botha, Van der Merwe, Bester and Albertyn (2007) indicate that practical AR is widely used in the research on training and development programmes, because the purpose of training and development programme research is to achieve competencies in life-skills, rather than pure academic knowledge and technical skills, as provided by the traditional research approach. Further, the practical AR cycle can assist regulators, training providers and SME owner-managers to decide on suitable and appropriate training programmes. To be more specific, practical AR which aims at holistic development of individuals, could be used to facilitate adult education training, i.e., SME owner-managers' training in this study (Botha et al., 2007).

The main aim of employing practical AR is to improve practice (such as course development, professional development, teaching and learning), rather than to produce new knowledge. To justify further the use of practical AR in this study, Elliot (1991) explains that course development is not a separate teaching process, but is a process that occurs through the reflective practice of teaching. Elliot (1991) states that the improvement of teaching and the development of teachers/trainers/facilitators are integral dimensions of course development. Akdere (2003) also indicates that using the AR approach in entrepreneurs training and development programme can ultimately help trainers to improve various components of teaching, such as programme design development, authentic assessment strategies, classroom management strategies, training strategies and the most important, developing needs of adult learners.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Thus, the reason the practical AR approach is used to improve or to develop the course in training programme of entrepreneurs is because it falls under the problem-solving or improving current practice.

REFERENCES

- Akder, M. (2003). Action research paradigm in the field of training and development. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 27(8), 413–422.
- Akder, M. (2005). Social capital theory and implications for human resource development. *Singapore Management Review*, 27(2), 1–24.
- Amir Hussin, M. R., Alias, R. A., & Ismail, K. (2013). Development of training programme curriculum for small and medium enterprise (SMEs). In *International Conference on Rural Development and Entrepreneurship (ICORE 2013)* (pp. 28–38). Purwokerto, Java, Indonesia. <https://doi.org/978-983-44592-5-3>
- Argyris, C. (1993). *On organisational learning*. Cambridge, MA.: Blackwell.
- Botha, M. J., Van Der Merwe, M. E., Bester, A., & Albertyn, R. M. (2007). Entrepreneurial skill development: Participatory action research approach in a rural community. *Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences*, 35, 9–16.
- Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (2002). *Becoming critical : education, knowledge and action research*. London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Checkland, P., & Poulter, J. (2006). *Learning for action: a short definition account of soft systems methodology and its use for practitioners, teachers and students*. UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research Methods in Education* (5th ed.). London and New York: RoutledgeFalmer, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Cornwall, A. (1996). Towards participatory practice: participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and the participatory process. In *Participatory Research in Health: Issues and Experiences* (pp. 94–107). London: Zed Books.
- Cumming, T. G., & Worley, C. G. (2005). *Organisation development and change* (8th ed.). South western, USA: Thompson.
- Davidson, R. A. (2011). Ethics! Teaching ethics to accounting students. In *Annual Summit on Business and Entrepreneurial Studies (ASBES 2011) Proceeding* (pp. 224–234). Kuching, Sarawak.
- Dick, B. (2002). Postgraduate programs using action research. *The Learning Organization*, 9(4), 159–170.
- Elliot, J. (1991). *Action research for educational change*. USA: Open University Press, Milton Keynes Philadelphia.
- French, W. L., & Bell, C. H. (1999). *Organisation development: Behavioural science interventions for organisation improvement* (6th ed.). USA: Prentice Hall.
- Grundy, S. (1987). *Curriculum: Product or Praxis*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge & human interests*. UK: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Hatzakis, T., Lycett, M., & Serrano, A. (2007). A programme management approach for ensuring curriculum coherence in IS (higher) education. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 16, 643–657.
- Holter, I. M., & Schwartz - Barcott, D. (1993). Action Research: What is it? How has it been used and how can it be used in nursing? *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, (128), 298–304.
- Hussey, J., & Hussey, R. (1997). *Business Research*. London: MacMillan Press Ltd.
- Kelliher, F., Foley, A., & Frampton, A. M. (2009). Facilitating small firm learning networks in the Irish tourism sector. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 9(1), 80–95.
- Lebar, O. (2014). *Kajian tindakan dalam pendidikan: teori dan amalan*. Tanjung Malim, Malaysia: Penerbit UPSI.
- McGrath, H., & O'Toole, T. (2012). Critical issues in research design in action research in an SME development context. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 36(5), 508–526.

- McKernan, J. (1991). *Curriculum Action Research. A Handbook of Methods and Resources for the Reflective Practitioner*. London: Kogan Page.
- O'Brien, R. (1998). An overview of the methodology approach of action research. Retrieved from http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/xx_ar_final.htm
- Qureshil, S., Kamal, M., & Wolcott, P. (2009). Information technology interventions for growth and competitiveness in micro-enterprises. *International Journal of E-Business Research*, 5(1), 117–140.
- Riding, P., Fowell, S., & Levy, P. (1995). An action research approach to curriculum development. *Information Research*, 1(1), 1–7.
- Stringer, E. T. (2014). *Action Research* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Swanson, R. A., & Holton III, E. F. (2005). *Research in organisations: foundation and methods of inquiry*. USA: Berrett Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Fletcher, M. (2007). The quality of an action research thesis in the social sciences. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 15(4), 413–436.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Perry, C. (2002). Action research within organisations and university thesis writing. *The Learning Organization*, 9(4), 171–179.