The Action Research Cycle

What is Action Research?

„Action research is a vital professional growth strategy that can be broadly defined as an individual or collective inquiry within one's professional practice for the purpose of self-improvement, thereby increasing the probability of greater student learning."[1] It is a form of research that allows teachers to conduct a deep investigatation into the process of **their own** teaching and the learning of **their own** students.

Traditional Research vs Action Research[2]

	Traditional Research	**Action Research**
WHO?	External scholar	Practicioners
GOAL?	Explain/Predict controlled educational activity	Improve one's own practice
WHERE?	Controlled environment	One's own district
WHY?	To report conclusions that can be generated to larger populations	To take action for improvement of one's own practice
HOW?	Mostly quantitative	Qualitative and/or quantitative

Types of Action Research

According to Sagor, there are three types of action research projects in the filed of education:

- **Descriptive** – a study of a group (e. g. a class of students) in order to *analyse* the probable *causes* for the issue under study.
- **Quasi-experimental** – an *evaluation* of the impact of a previously implemented change (e. g. a new curriculum or teaching method etc.) It is called quasi because the sample is not randomly selected, but context dependent (e. g. your students)
- **Case study –** a study that focuses on an indiviual and aims at either *analysis* of the probable cause of a behaviour or *evaluation* of the impact of a previously implemented change.

None of these models is linear, i. e. the researcher uses the results of one part of the process to re-think and re-plan action from one step to another.

Where and how to begin?

Identify the issue in focus

Carefully reflect on your professional experience. Identify an issue that is of real and sincere interest or concern for you. Focus on your students — one aspect of the teaching and learning process – something which you can directly influence, and which is within your control. Check its relevance:

[1] Markowitz, A. (2010). Teacher's Classroom-based Action Research: an Alternate View. *Action Research for the Professional Development of Teachers*, Education and Teacher Training Agency, Zagreb

[2] Sagor, R. (2000). Guiding School Improvement Through Action Research. ASCD Washington

Why is this issue important to me? Carefully consider the immediate and long-term effects of your action research – ask yourself: *Why is this issue really worthy of investing my busy teacher's time into it?* Engage your colleague as **peer coach** or **critical friend** in the action research process. Keeping a reflective journal is also a valuable tool for tracking information, reflection and findings over time.

Clarify the issue

What does the theory say about this issue? Read relevant literature to broaden and deepen your perspective on the issue. Once you gain an insight into generalized knowledge from external sources about the issue in focus, you may wish/need to revise it.

Identify Research Questions and formulate the Issue Statement

In order to achieve significant change you must go under the surface of an issue, to identify the patterns – *why* something is happening. An excellent metaphor is "tip of the iceberg"
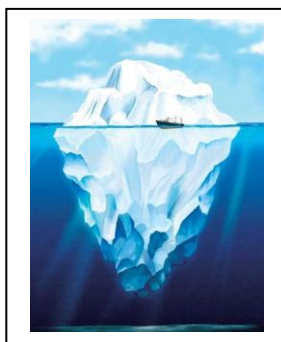
Surface (what we can observe)	events, behaviour, norms, habits	reactive mechanisms
Patterns (elements guiding behaviour and habits)	attitudes, feelings, expectations	adaptive mechanisms
Mental models	identity system of values and beliefs	generative mechanisms

Issue statement example "It appears that my Grade 5 students this year lack motivation for project work. This is identified by not very effective work of project teams, not turning in project reports on time and poor quality of their presentations. The purpose of this descriptive study is to analyse the probable causes of their lack of motivation for project work.

Collect, organise and analyse data

Classroom-based research depends on the specific context. You develop a data-gathering plan and instruments having in mind the issue in focus, with the aim of providing answers to your research questions. The *Triangulation matrix* in which you link the source of data with a research question is useful for data-collection, organization and analysis. If all data sources for a research question are consistent then the answer has a high degree of certainty. Also, you may come across additional findings. In this case, reflection and sharing with a critical friend may help you decide how to incorporate them into the research.

Report the Results

Report the results of your findings to all interested parties – your peer coaches or critical friends, students and other colleagues. Your findings are specific for a particular group/individual of your study and cannot be generalised, but the methodology, data-collection strategies, peer collaboration and the experience of the whole process can be useful for other researchers.

Take informed action

The research findings that you have obtained from data analysis will help you decide what action to take. Also, take notes on the results over some time – this will be your starting point for the next action research cycle aimed at evaluating the impact of the implemented change.