



R5 - Action Research Evaluation Methods

Many different kinds of data can be helpful when undertaking Action Research, so three key principles may help in deciding which evaluation methods to select:

1. Choose a mix of methods, qualitative and quantitative. Ideally select three methods. This will allow you to allow 'triangulate' your sources. Triangulating - collecting from more than two sources - helps you to be more confident that you are forming reliable judgments.
2. Remember that the data you collect will have to be analysed, so be realistic about the time you have for analysis. For example, video recordings may take many hours to analyse if you watch them again in real time.
3. The more you can build evaluation methods into the natural processes of your lessons, the more likely it is that it will get done reliably.

Whichever methods you select, you should take care to abide by your institution's requirements for confidentiality, recording images of students and staff and seeking parental permission where appropriate. Also, if you want to use quotes from individuals in your report do not forget to anonymize their names.

The following evaluation methods can be useful. Each has a brief description along with an overview of its pros and cons as a method.

Attitude survey

Surveys and questionnaires, sometimes called 'self-report questionnaires' are lists of predetermined questions designed to produce various different types of response. Responses can be, for example, yes/no, on a scale (e.g. never-sometimes-often-always) or free text answers.

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<p>Good way at getting at impact on learners or teachers over a course of time if administered more than once.</p> <p>Can provide both qualitative and quantitative data.</p>	<p>Items may not have same meaning to different participants and individuals have different interpretations of the same events. Blank responses can be ambiguous. Did the student mean 'absolutely never' or did they not understand the question?</p> <p>Young children may find this difficult.</p> <p>Once respondents have understood the complexity of an idea they may be more self-critical and findings may, therefore, be negative.</p>

R5 - Action Research Evaluation Methods

Individual Interview

Interviews can provide helpful data which can then be collected at several stages in any intervention. The interview questions can be highly structured and pre-determined by the interviewer, or the interviews may be less structured and conducted more like an everyday conversation between two people.

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Provide in-depth data and allow interviewers to gain informed personal impressions. Allows the interviewer to develop understanding of interviewees' perceptions of their situation.	Interviewing is a skill that takes time to develop and the interviewer needs to be careful not to ask leading questions, influence the interviewee, or ask questions differently from person to person. No one interviewee interprets the same question identically and interviewers themselves are never neutral. Sometimes changes may not be easy to be put into words. Interviews that require transcription in order to be analysed are a time consuming way of collecting data.

Focus groups

Focus groups are a form of group facilitated interview where a small number of learners or teachers are brought together for a short period of time to discuss a particular issue or issues.

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Good way of sharpening understanding. Effective way of analysing different viewpoints. Allows participants' views to develop on an issue as they hear others' opinions. Allows specific subjects to be evaluated in depth.	Participants may not say what they really think or feel. Interviewer needs to facilitate well to ensure all views are represented.

R5 - Action Research Evaluation Methods

Observation grid

Given the impossibility of noticing everything that happens in a lesson, observation grids help to focus on a small number of aspects of what is happening in a lesson and map this against time. Observations may be recorded periodically, say every 5 or 10 minutes. Or they may focus on a specific pupil or group of pupils. Or they might look at an aspect of the whole, for example the degree of concentration v. distraction at any one time.

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Low likelihood of researcher 'contamination' Can be useful if researcher has a clear set of things to watch for.	Difficult for a teacher to undertake without impairing the quality of their teaching

Checklists

A checklist is a list of things to observe, remember or do. It is normally used as part of an observation although it can act as an aide memoire to encourage focus.

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Helps to ensure focus and comparability.	May be a good checklist but not be relevant to situation you are studying!

Learning log

A learning log is a simple way of recording and reflecting on experiences which can be useful for both learners and teachers. Learning logs are a useful way of formalising reflections about what has been learned and how the person thinks they can do better next time. Depending on the intervention the Log can be structured to ask specifically about whatever is being done. The respondent's ability to be self-reflective should be borne in mind.

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Encourages reflection and analysis. Helps to make implicit learning more explicit. Allows unconscious insights to surface.	Does not always achieve a good response rate if dependent upon learner initiative. Open ended questions run the risk of being very time consuming to analyse, or of being ignored by respondents' altogether. Can be hard to interpret meaning.

R5 - Action Research Evaluation Methods

Diary

Diaries are a simple factual way of recording what took place over a period of time on a daily basis which can be useful for both learners and teachers.

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Can work well for specific, factual data collection. Rather than relying on learner memory at interview, this is a good way of getting more accurate records of frequency and duration of logged activities.	Does not always achieve a good response rate if dependent upon learner initiative.

Critical incident review

As its name suggests, a critical incident review is a way of recording and analysing those events during a day or week which seem to have a special significance for the person concerned. Data can be collected via a simple written proforma, by discussion or through a learning log or diary – close to the event – and then analysed later.

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Encourages a focus on behavioural change. Encourages reflection. Encourages impact analysis.	Can become an opportunity for criticising others rather than analysing own practice. Requires commitment to both initial observation and subsequent reflection.

Story

Stories exist in many forms. They can be first person or third person narratives but often work best as short case studies. They can be written from the perspective of the researcher. Or you might want to illuminate classroom activity by asking pupils to tell you their view of things.

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Tend to be detailed and contextualised. Highly effective means of describing practice.	Difficult to compare.

Recording

Using digital cameras to record still or moving images or voice recorders to capture conversations can provide a rich source of data.

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Authenticity. Richness of detail.	Time-consuming to analyse, potentially requiring transcription.

R5 - Action Research Evaluation Methods

Can be replayed many times. Provides quotes for your report.	Can be distracting.
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Document analysis

Document analysis, as its name suggests, involves the collection and systematic analysis of documents relating to a particular area of interest. Schools are full of documents which describe intentions, for example, vision statements, annual reports, descriptions of curricula or extra-curricular opportunities.

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Allows in-depth analysis of schools' priorities and practices.	Can produce interpretations which do not match the reality of school life.

School/College data

Educational institutions routinely collect data on attainment, destinations, attendance, test scores and so on and Action Research can draw on these depending on what it is trying to illuminate. In almost all cases researchers will want to at least notice any (short-term) impact on attainment.

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Grounds research in the reality of school/college life. Normally readily accessible.	Interventions are often too short to 'claim' any impact on attainment. Causality cannot be inferred when there are other changes taking place