

Action Research for Theological Librarians: a Bibliographic Essay

by Barry W. Hamilton

According to Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, action research “is a research strategy that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to promote social analysis and democratic social change.... AR aims to increase the ability of the involved communities or organization members to control their own destinies more effectively and to improve their capacity to do so within a more sustainable and just environment.” Action research “explicitly rejects the separation between thought and action that underlies the pure/applied distinction that has characterized social research for a number of generations.” As Greenwood and Levin affirm, “We believe that valid social knowledge can only be derived from practical reasoning engaged in through action. As action researchers, we believe that action is the only sensible way to generate and test new knowledge.”¹ Action research offers practitioners an unparalleled opportunity to expand the frontiers of professional practice, including the practice of theological librarianship.

Greenwood and Levin acknowledge that it is difficult to find resources that provide overviews of action research. They believe that “students and novice practitioners generally lack access to a sufficiently comprehensive and balanced way to learn about the diverse origins, theories, methods, motives, and problems associated with this complex field.”² The present essay recommends several recent publications that can provide theological librarians with background knowledge in action research. However, no one can become an action researcher simply through reading these books and applying a set of techniques. Perhaps the best way to learn action research is through experienced mentors working with theological librarians in the professional setting. Through action research, theological librarians can become “reflective practitioners.”

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ACTION RESEARCH

To use action research most effectively, one needs to understand its philosophical orientation. An excellent resource for this purpose is Joe L. Kincheloe, *Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003). Aimed at empowering classroom teachers, Kincheloe uncovers the abuses of positivistic research with its alleged “cult of experts” who support elitist power structures. With reference to the work of Paolo Freire, Michael Polanyi, John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, and feminist criticism, he contrasts the value of practitioner-generated theory with the misapplication of positivist research that disenfranchises people within organizations.

Contrary to some research models, action research rejects the perception that knowledge is something “out there,” beyond the scope of knowing subjects. Knowledge cannot be packaged and distributed without reference to its historical and political contexts. Through postmodern analysis of the hidden agenda behind some forms of positivist research, Kincheloe advocates a critical constructivism that recognizes the inherently personal nature of knowledge production. Classrooms cannot be objectified into valueless, context-indifferent distribution centers of learning. Rather, classrooms are characterized by *difference*; children and teachers are *individuals*; in fact, when teachers reflect on their practice, they come to recognize the unyielding complexity of their work.

¹ Davydd J. Greenwood and Morten Levin, *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 5-6.

² Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research*, 4.

Barry Hamilton is Associate Professor of Historical and Contemporary Theology and Theological Librarian at the B. Thomas Golisano Library, Northeastern Seminary, Rochester, New York.

A valuable resource for understanding this perspective is Greenwood and Levin, *Introduction to Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007). The authors bring a distinct political consciousness to the discussion, affirm diversity as a core value in democratic processes, and focus on action research as a liberating force for effecting social change. In Chapter 2, they provide an extensive survey of the historical development of action research. Other chapters provide case studies, an in-depth discussion of epistemological foundations, a comparison of scientific method and action research, credibility and validity, and a broad view of action research “that argues for understanding AR as a research strategy that uses many conventional social science techniques but that orchestrates the overall research process in (a) distinctive way” (89). As the authors point out on page 163, “AR and feminism share underlying ethical and political commitments to democracy and social justice.” Taken together, Kincheloe and Greenwood/Levin offer a strong introduction to the philosophical and political dimensions of action research.

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead have recently published *All You Need to Know About Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), a comprehensive survey of the action research process from its philosophical assumptions to the dissemination of its results. McNiff and Whitehead explicate each part of the AR cycle and raise questions that readers can use to inform their own studies. They are especially adept at breaking down the AR method into its constituent parts, so that neophytes can move into the thought processes that lead to the improvement of practice. While McNiff and Whitehead emphasize the use of AR for the empowerment of participants (see p. 114) and include a chapter on “Engaging with the Politics of Knowledge” (173-190), they adopt a more inviting posture than Kincheloe or Greenwood/Levin. Even with these strengths, *All You Need to Know About Action Research* may not be the best choice for getting started. Some Doctor of Ministry students who used the book as a textbook found it difficult to envision the AR process. Indeed, McNiff and Whitehead rely almost entirely on text accompanied by minimalist charts and graphics. However, experienced action researchers will benefit from their discussion, particularly in terms of developing an action plan, collecting and managing data, turning data into evidence, and improving the credibility of their reports to a wider audience.

THE ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

The action research cycle is a way to conceptualize formally the movement between thought and action in professional practice. According to Andrew P. Johnson,

The action research process involves five essential steps or parts. First, ask a question, identify a problem, or define an area of exploration. Determine what it is you want to study. Second, decide what data should be collected, how they should be collected, and how often. Third, collect and analyze data. Fourth, describe how your findings can be used and applied. You create your plan for action based on your findings. And finally, report or share your findings and plan for action with others.³

Richard A. Schmuck, *Practical Action Research for Change*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2006) is a splendid resource for beginners. A Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon, Schmuck’s extensive teaching experience and scholarship is evident throughout the book. He discusses philosophy, but in a manner suitable for an introductory level, using short paragraphs, large boldface fonts for headings, and including extensive bulleted lists, graphs, and charts to illustrate his points. He provides exercises such as “Know Thyself,” a series of sentence stems “to reflect on who you are” (13), offers several definitions of action research, recognizes group dynamics as essential to action research, lists two models of action research (proactive and responsive), and incorporates his own

³ Andrew P. Johnson, *A Short Guide to Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2008), 28.

graphical conceptions of the action research model, with examples of each step of the process. Schmuck guides his beginner-level readers through the entire process of AR from finding a topic, understanding the research process, collecting data, pilot-testing projects, understanding group dynamics, and improving communication skills with participants. Moreover, he adds an entire chapter on “Prominent Authors on Action Research” (Chapter 9). Like McNiff and Whitehead, Schmuck stresses the roots of AR in democracy—especially in terms of empowering practitioners and their participants to think for themselves and improve their lives.

Another helpful introductory resource is Andrew P. Johnson, *A Short Guide to Action Research*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, 2008). One of the best features of this book is the section “An Overview of the Action Research Process” found in Chapter Six, “The Beginning.” While Schmuck incorporates better graphics, Johnson provides a list of “action research steps” enabling beginners to grasp the overall process of action research. He offers suggestions for finding topics and asking questions about the practice of classroom teaching, and helps his readers understand the fundamentals of writing literature reviews. He even includes chapters on “Methods of Collecting Data” and “Methods of Analyzing Data,” provides concrete examples of data collection methods and discusses such major concepts of data analysis as validity, reliability, and triangulation in elementary terms. Johnson’s strongest contributions are found in Chapter Ten, “Quantitative Design in Action Research.” In this chapter, he discusses “three quantitative research designs that can fit within the action research paradigm: correlational research, causal-comparative research, and quasi-experimental research.”⁴ Perhaps no other resource available explains the role of quantitative research as clearly as this chapter, especially for practitioners with little or no experience with action research.

In their 2003 textbook *You and Your Action Research Project*, 2nd ed. (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), McNiff and Whitehead, with Pamela Lomax, divide the action research process into its component parts and provide checklists for getting started with a research project. Their introduction warns readers not to turn action research into a “set of techniques” aimed at “specific behavioral outcomes.” Whereas the authors view action research as “a term that communicated the processes of people coming together to work collaboratively to achieve commonly agreed personal and social goals,” some advocates (e.g., school administrators) use action research as a “how-to” strategy for reaching institutional goals (2). Action research thus becomes a tool for maintaining existing power structures. *You and Your Action Research Project* rejects this approach and supports the practitioner in his/her own initiatives to improve practice. The authors place the emphasis on the “I” at the center of the research—“I am the subject and object of the research,” “I take responsibility for my own actions,” etc. The researcher’s values and judgments are primary components; the researcher maintains openness to learning, yet holds his/her ground on the basis of ethical principles.

Still another recently published resource on action research that could be helpful for beginners is Valsa Koshy’s *Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman, 2005). Filled with illustrations of the action research cycle, bulleted lists of action steps, and related case studies, Koshy breaks down the research process for practitioners who have little or no experience with action research. Separate sections define action research and point out its distinctive features, offer tips for reviewing literature, help the practitioner plan action steps, and provide advice for developing data collection instruments, analyzing data and writing up the report. All this makes it easy for the researcher; however, one must question how much “emancipation” this approach can deliver. The price of simplicity may be the lack of an epistemological framework for escaping the

⁴ Johnson, *A Short Guide to Action Research*, 112.

oppression of positivistic, hierarchical forms of knowledge. This type of resource turns action research into a step-by-step manual for improving professional practice; however, without the critical-philosophical perspective, a positivistic ideology may still unduly influence the practitioner. Researchers can improve their own practice but are less likely to generate their own theory. Thus Koshy's book should never be used by itself, but as a helpful guide to understanding the basic steps in the action research cycle.

Practitioners pursuing a doctoral degree can find a helpful introduction to the philosophical foundations of action research in Kathryn Herr and Gary L. Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005). This resource provides further discussion of the historical and philosophical foundations of action research, including its multiple traditions and emerging perspectives. The authors devote an entire chapter to "positionality" within action research—i.e., outsider/insider, participative/collaborative configurations—the problem of relation between the researcher(s) and the setting. Chapter 4, "Quality Criteria for Action Research: An Ongoing Conversation," closely examines the issue of validity within action research, an indispensable element in any text that deals with action research projects. However, Herr and Anderson should especially be commended for the level of discussion that blends philosophy of research with the politics of knowledge creation. They also provide helpful discussion on what an action research dissertation should look like; however, their advice should best be taken alongside the examination of action research projects. Indeed, the best way to learn action research is a judicious combination of studying the published literature, examining completed action research projects that resemble the researcher's own interests, and relying upon a seasoned mentor.

Anderson and Herr, along with Ann Sigrid Nihlen, have recently published a second edition of *Studying Your Own School: An Educator's Guide to Practitioner Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2007). The authors continue their discussion of issues prominent in *The Action Research Dissertation*, including historical and philosophical foundations, validity, empowerment, and ethics. However, they discuss these issues from the perspective of teachers as researchers and include examples taken from the public school environment. They provide a helpful discussion of the components of action research, including separate sections on "Crafting a Question for Study" (125-133) and "Ethical Considerations" (133-145). While they provide no illustrations of the action research cycle, their text does provide supplementary material for understanding the individual components and the larger political/ethical issues of school-based practitioner research.

FUTURE TRENDS IN ACTION RESEARCH

Building on thriving action research development in the United Kingdom, Mark Fox, Peter Martin, and Gill Green have recently published *Doing Practitioner Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007). These authors look broadly at the development of several types of action research, including participatory action research, emancipatory action research, and practitioner action research. They recognize action research as emerging along several lines of postmodern inquiry rather than a singular mode of research methodology. In fact, Fox, Martin, and Green define action research in terms of the research framework, a framing that takes into account any of three research worlds: the objective world, the socially constructed world, or the individually constructed world.

While *Doing Practitioner Research* covers several aspects of the action research process, it's not the first choice for someone who is just starting to learn this research methodology. Rather, this book is an intermediate-level supplementary resource for looking at action research in its broader developmental context. Readers who already have a basic grasp of the action research cycle will find further instruction for looking at the alternative ways in

which action research can be framed. They will also find helpful advice for considering “mixed methodologies” for their projects, i.e., the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Moreover, *Doing Practitioner Research* assists the seasoned action researcher with the broader philosophical issues of carrying out research within organizations. For example, the authors point out the various approaches to evaluation that can take place, from the perspectives of positivism, social constructivism, and realism. They provide a separate section that discusses realist evaluation (69ff.) along with the “shadow side” of organizations—politics and culture. Throughout the book, the authors lay out a broad menu of philosophical issues and encourage researchers to consider the complexity of organizations. Indeed, practitioner research within a social setting defies simple reductionism and ready solutions. Consequently, those who carry out action research will bring a more rigorous planning agenda to the table and implement their plans with stronger criteria for evaluating the results.

Building on their decades of experience, Whitehead and McNiff extend their discussion of the action research cycle with *Action Research Living Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006). Here the authors provide a more forceful presentation of the postmodern philosophical foundations of action research, and defend the validity of practitioner-centered research as over traditional positivistic research. They show how propositional theories limit the researcher to the pursuit of truth that can be stated in text format, whereas practice embodies multidimensional realities that elude propositional statements. Although positivist experts deliver pre-packaged theories for practitioners to follow, Whitehead urges that theory emerge from practice. Confined by conventional modes of thought imposed through imbalanced power relations, researchers move within assumed limits brought to bear on practice through bureaucratic authority. Whitehead and McNiff challenge practitioners to develop their own theories that emerge from actual practice rather than accept pre-defined boundaries of theorizing.

An advanced text for experienced action researchers, *Action Research Living Theory* reiterates several themes from other publications by Whitehead and McNiff. However, this book goes much further into the postmodern critique of positivism and includes extensive discussions on philosophers who have influenced the authors, including Jürgen Habermas and Gaston Bachelard. Whitehead and McNiff are especially concerned to defend the validity of action research—its capacity to generate questions, to probe beyond the boundaries of propositional truth, to open the way to new experiences in practice that generate new theory more closely resembling authentic human experience. Although the discussion may seem heavy going at times, the authors are justified in their effort to make action research the engine of living theory rather than a technical process that supports the status quo.

Experienced action researchers interested in cutting-edge discussions of methodology should consider Tony Brown and Liz Jones, *Action Research and Postmodernism: Congruence and Critique* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001). The authors look at the modernist presuppositions that still prevail in action research, such as the notion that practitioners can “stand still” and capture the complexity of their working environment. Brown and Jones closely examine the notion of practitioner research and offer perspectives on how postmodernism can open up new ways of understanding “improvement” within one’s practice. Instead of placing the practitioner’s self at the center, they see the research process emerging from the production of writing samples. These writing samples negotiate identity-formation in the movement of the practitioner through time. As postmodern, the authors reject fixed notions (e.g., self, identity, practice, education) and recognize the negotiating process that creates meaning (following postmodern philosophers such as Habermas and Lacan). From their perspective, action research moves from “emancipation” toward “evolution” of new identity and meaning.

A CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS

A constantly changing environment presents challenges both to our profession and to its members' institutions.⁵ Action research could enable the profession—within specific contexts—to articulate how theological librarianship is evolving to provide services for constituents. Moreover, action research could motivate theological librarians to work collaboratively with institutional stakeholders, e.g., teaching faculty, administrators, and clergy. Theological librarians could employ action research to develop services for changing student demographics—new services that could more effectively serve ethnic populations, adult students, and people with disabilities. Like salaried professionals in other fields, theological librarians face a number of institutional constraints: budget cuts, administrative perceptions, and limited personnel. Action research could present case studies of successful professional practice—a clear picture of actual work being done in today's theological libraries. How could a small seminary with limited finances manage to develop a state-of-the-art information commons? How could a consortium of several seminaries consolidate their libraries into a shared facility, in spite of significant administrative transitions among each of them? How could theological librarians in a regional consortium set new benchmarks for excellence in its collections and services among each of its member libraries? Through success stories of this nature, action research promises to enrich the profession's members and the institutions they serve.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Gary L., Kathryn Herr and Ann Sigrid Nihlen. *Studying Your Own School: An Educator's Guide to Practitioner Action Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2007.
- Brown, Tony and Liz Jones. *Action Research and Postmodernism: Congruence and Critique*. Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001.
- Fox, Mark, Peter Martin and Gill Green. *Doing Practitioner Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007.
- Greenwood, Davydd J. and Morten Levin. *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007.
- Herr, Kathryn and Gary L. Anderson. *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005.
- Johnson, Andrew P. *A Short Guide to Action Research*, 3rd ed. Boston: Pearson Education, 2008.
- Kincheloe, Joe L. *Teachers as Researchers: Qualitative Inquiry as a Path to Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Koshy, Valsa. *Action Research for Improving Practice: A Practical Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Paul Chapman, 2005.
- McNiff, Jean, Pamela Lomax and Jack Whitehead. *You and Your Action Research Project*. 2nd ed. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003.
- McNiff, Jean and Jack Whitehead. *All You Need to Know About Action Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006.
- Schmuck, Richard A. *Practical Action Research for Change*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2006.
- Whitehead, Jack and Jean McNiff. *Action Research: Living Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006.



⁵ See David Stewart, "Theological Librarianship and Its Possible Futures," *Summary of Proceedings, Fifty-ninth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (Austin, TX), 15-18 June 2005, 208-217; and Daniel Aleshire, "Librarianship is a Noun: Speculation about the Future of Theological Librarianship," *Summary of Proceedings, Sixtieth Annual Conference of the American Theological Library Association* (Chicago, IL), 21-24 June 2006, 88-94.