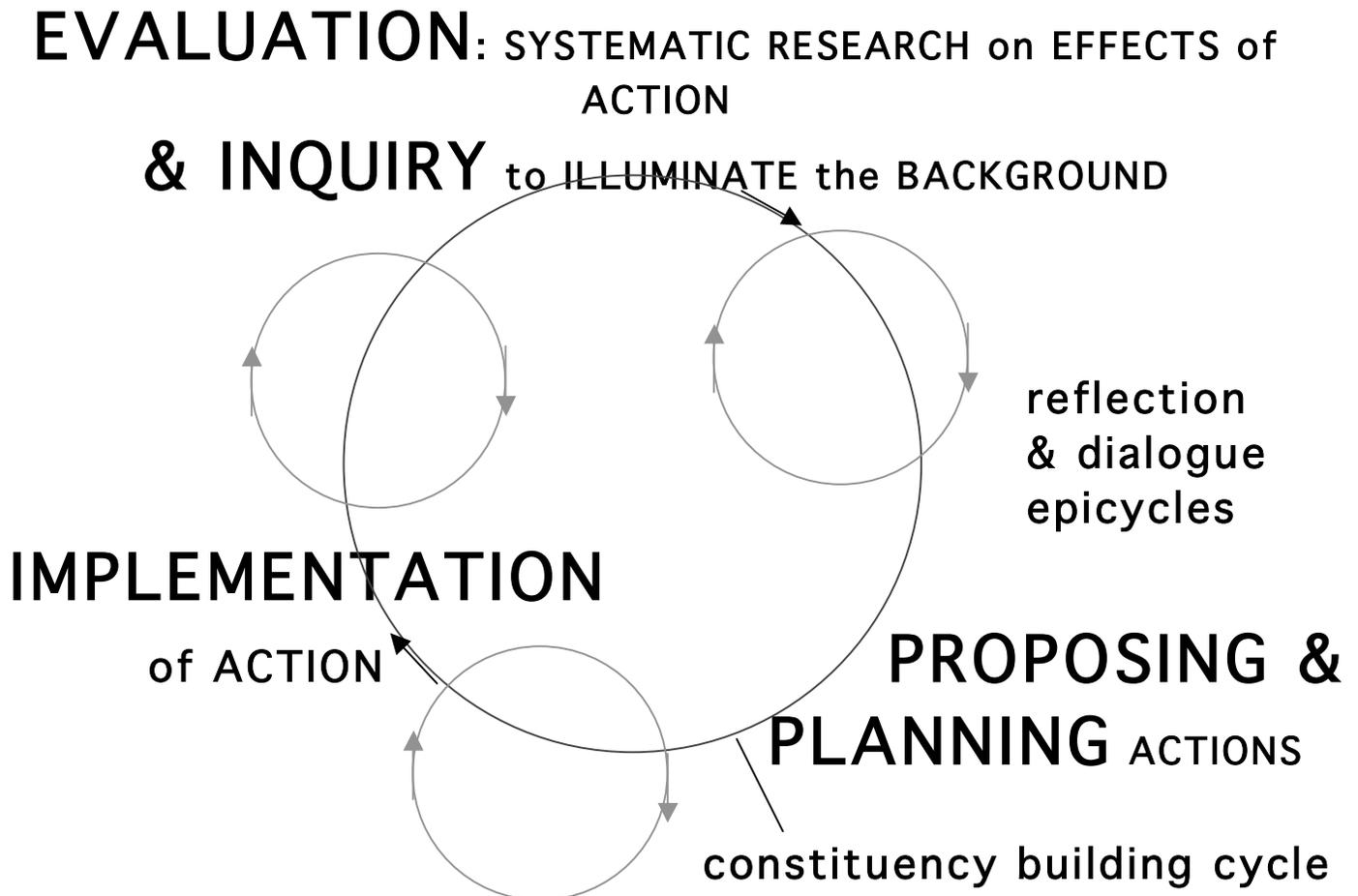


CYCLES and EPICYCLES of ACTION RESEARCH

for EDUCATIONAL, ORGANIZATIONAL, PROFESSIONAL and
PERSONAL CHANGE

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Overview

Action Research begins when you (individually or in a group) want to do something to change the current situation, that is, to take action. The action may be: a new or revised curriculum; organizational arrangement, policy, or procedure in educational settings; equivalent changes in other professions, workplaces, or communities; changes in personal practices, and so on.

To develop proposals about what change is needed, you may need to evaluate¹ the effects of past actions and to inquire more broadly so you take into account the relevant background. You will also have to get people—yourselves included—to adopt or adapt your proposals. In other words, you have to build a constituency for any actions. Constituency building happens when you draw people into reflection, dialogue, and other participatory processes that elicit ideas about the current situation, clarify objectives, and generate ideas and plans to take action to improve it; when people work together to implement actions; and when people see evaluations of how good the actions/changes were in achieving the objectives.

Evaluation of the effects of a change or action can lead to new or revised ideas about further changes and about how to build a constituency around them, thus stimulating ongoing cycles of action research. Each cycle is not, however, a steady progression one step to the next. Reflection and dialogue “epicycles” (i.e.,

¹ Underlined terms are elaborated in the section that follows the overview.

cycles on top of cycles) at any point can lead to you to revisit and revise the ideas you had about what change is needed and about how to build a constituency to implement the change. Revision also happens when before you settle on what actions to pursue you look ahead at what may be involved in implementing or evaluating proposed actions and building a constituency around them. Such looking ahead is one of the essential features of planning.

In summary, action research involves evaluation and inquiry, reflection and dialogue, constituency building, planning and revision in order to clarify what to change, get actions implemented, take stock of the outcomes, and continue developing your efforts.

Elaboration of Aspects of Action Research

Evaluation is the systematic study of the effects of actions. You use the results of evaluations -- of actions taken before you got involved or in another setting as well as actions you implement -- to design new or revised actions and to convince others to implement equivalent actions in other settings. To establish the specific effect of a specific action a comparison is needed of a situation in which the action is taken with one in which it is not, with nothing else varying systematically between the two situations. Such a comparison may be hard to find or achieve; in any case, tightly focused evaluations need to be complemented by broader inquiry to clarify what warrants change and action in view of what is known about this situation and others like it and to clarify what a potential constituency is.

[Tools introduced in CCT 693 for Evaluation: Critical Incident Questionnaire, Evaluation Clock, Basic logic of statistical analysis, +Δ Feedback (appreciation, thing to be developed); for Inquiry: Inquiry based on Q of KAQ, Jigsaw discussion of texts]

Constituency building involves getting others to adopt or adapt your action proposals, or, better still, enlisting others to become part of the "you" that shapes, evaluates, and revises any proposals. Adoption/adaptation is helped by succinct presentations to a potential constituency of action proposals and the evaluations and inquiry that supports them. Enlistment is helped by facilitation of "stakeholder" participation in the initial evaluation and inquiry, in formulation of action proposals, and in planning so as to bring about their investment in implementing the proposals. If the actions are personal changes and the constituency is yourself, you can still facilitate your own evaluation and planning process to ensure your investment in the actions. Indeed, constituency building begins with yourself. In order to contribute effectively to change, you need to be engaged—to have your head and heart together. You need to pay attention to what help you need to get engaged and stay so.

[Tools introduced in CCT 693 for Constituency building: Dialogue process, Focused conversation, Historical scan, +Δ Feedback, Small group roles, Strategic Participatory Planning]

Reflection and dialogue are valuable for: ongoing revision of your ideas about the current situation; for generating action proposals; and for drawing more people into your constituency. Through reflection and dialogue you can check that the evaluation and inquiry you undertake about the current situation and past actions relate well to possible actions you are considering and constituencies you intend to build. You can check that the results of your evaluations and inquiry support the actions and constituency building you pursue. You can review what actually happens when an action is implemented and its effects are evaluated and then generate ideas for the next cycle of action research.

[Tools introduced in CCT 693 for Reflection: Guided freewriting, KAQ, Focused Conversation, Supportive listening, Strategic Personal Planning, Dialogue Process, Historical scan; for Dialogue: Dialogue Process, probing of KAQ, Small group roles, Focused Conversation, Jig-saw discussion of texts, Historical scan]

Planning involves looking ahead at what may be involved before you settle on what actions to pursue. Planning is strategic when action proposals respect the resources—possibly limited—that you and others in your constituency have and elicit investment in implementation of those actions.

[Tools introduced in CCT 693: KAQ, Evaluation clock, Strategic Personal/Participatory Planning]

All these processes continue during the implementation of actions, but that is not the focus of CCT 693.