



Torah at the Center

The Educator as Researcher: Action Research

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Research often is thought of as being the domain of academics or experts who collect data objectively in order to devise theories that inform the work of practitioners. “Action research” is an approach in which practitioners investigate questions of concern and consequence to their practice using strategies and tools of researchers. Action research has its roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, a social scientist, who developed this approach in the 1940s for practitioners to address social problems. More recently it is informed by the work of such scholars as Chris Argyis, Donald Schon and David Kolb, who emphasize that practitioners learn in action through a careful examination of their own work.

Action research is based on the following assumptions:

- Educators learn best from real problems from which insights can be applied immediately to their work. While other professional-development learning approaches improve practice, action research does so directly within the context of the educator’s work.
- Educators benefit from growth opportunities with genuine time to reflect on their practice. Action research adds new information to the process of reflecting on one’s work and considering ways of working differently.
- Educators tend to be isolated and benefit from reflecting on their work in a community of practice. Action research can provide opportunities for sharing perspectives and engaging colleagues in problem-solving processes that can increase the learning of the researcher as well as his or her colleagues.

Action research has the benefit of fitting into the ongoing work of educators. Practitioners who are reflective critically in their work are well suited to conduct action research. Based on the experience of a number of educators, we offer the following version of the action research cycle:

Step #1—Reflect on a Concern

Select something that you want to change or influence in your practice. Think about where you’ve been and where you’d like to be, or focus on a pressing problem. Ask: What is the problem being addressed? What is the purpose of this action research? Why am I focusing on this particular issue? What do I hope to learn from this investigation? How do I think it will help me as an educator?

Step #2—Frame a Question

Set the parameters for your research. This step sets the focus for the rest of the study. The question should clearly outline what you are trying to learn, but avoid making it so specific that it overly constrains what you learn. Neither should the question be so broad that the process becomes overwhelming and loses its ability to inform your practice in a reasonable amount of time.

Step #3—Identify and Collect Data

Make use of multiple sources and perspectives. Researchers are distinguished from educators by a) how systematically the data are collected and b) the variety of sources tapped. Listen to the perspectives of key individuals affected by the problem (students, teachers, parents, professionals, lay leaders or others). A good rule is to have at least three different sources. These can include documents (any type of written material), interviews, focus group results, surveys or observations.

Step #4—Analyze Data

Determine what the data are describing. How do the various stakeholders view the situation? Where is there agreement and divergence of perspective? What themes are emerging? What is surprising? What confirms what you know? What challenges your assumptions?

Step #5—Share Findings and Implications

Discuss what you have learned. By sharing your findings with others and discussing the implications for your practice, you have the opportunity to hear different ways of thinking about your work. Focus on the data that are most important to your work or seem to have the most to suggest. Colleagues will be interested and well informed if you review all the steps in your process, explaining why you undertook this research and the methodology you used, in addition to the key findings.

Step #6—Application

Make use of what you have learned. The whole purpose of the research is to inform practice, and now you are ready. It is likely that, throughout the process, what you are learning will change your thinking and practice. As our tradition teaches, learn in order to do!