What is Action Research?
Action research is known by many other names, including participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action research, but all are variations on a theme. Put simply, action research is “learning by doing” - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again. While this is the essence of the approach, there are other key attributes of action research that differentiate it from common problem-solving activities that we all engage in every day. A more succinct definition is,

"Action research...aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process."¹

What separates this type of research from general professional practices, consulting, or daily problem-solving is the emphasis on scientific study, which is to say the researcher studies the problem systematically and ensures the intervention is informed by theoretical considerations. Much of the researcher’s time is spent on refining the methodological tools to suit the exigencies of the situation, and on collecting, analyzing, and presenting data on an ongoing, cyclical basis.

Several attributes separate action research from other types of research. Primary is its focus on turning the people involved into researchers, too - people learn best, and more willingly apply what they have learned, when they do it themselves. It also has a social dimension - the research takes place in real-world situations, and aims to solve real problems. Finally, the initiating researcher, unlike in other disciplines, makes no attempt to remain objective, but openly acknowledges their bias to the other participants.

Characteristic of Action Research
Action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves action, evaluation, and critical reflection and – based on the evidence gathered – changes in practice are then implemented. The following are the features of action research:

✔ Action research is participative and collaborative; it is undertaken by individuals with a common purpose.
✔ It is situation-based and context specific.
✔ It develops reflection based on interpretations made by the participants.
✔ Knowledge is created through action and at the point of application.
✔ Action research can involve problem solving, if the solution to the problem leads to the improvement of practice.
✔ In action research findings will emerge as action develops, but these are not conclusive or absolute.

¹ Thomas Gilmore, Jim Krantz and Rafael Ramirez, "Action Based Modes of Inquiry and the Host-Researcher Relationship," Consultation 5.3 (Fall 1986): 161.
Principles of Action Research
What gives action research its unique flavor is the set of principles that guide the research. Winter (1989) provides a comprehensive overview of six key principles.

Reflexive critique
An account of a situation, such as notes, transcripts or official documents, will make implicit claims to be authoritative, i.e., it implies that it is factual and true. Truth in a social setting, however, is relative to the teller. The principle of reflexive critique ensures people reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made. In this way, practical accounts can give rise to theoretical considerations.

Dialectical critique
Reality, particularly social reality, is consensually validated, which is to say it is shared through language. Phenomena are conceptualized in dialogue, therefore a dialectical critique is required to understand the set of relationships both between the phenomenon and its context, and between the elements constituting the phenomenon. The key elements to focus attention on are those constituent elements that are unstable, or in opposition to one another. These are the ones that are most likely to create changes.

Collaborative Resource
Participants in an action research project are co-researchers. The principle of collaborative resource presupposes that each person’s ideas are equally significant as potential resources for creating interpretive categories of analysis, negotiated among the participants. It strives to avoid the skewing of credibility stemming from the prior status of an idea-holder. It especially makes possible the insights gleaned from noting the contradictions both between many viewpoints and within a single viewpoint.

Risk
The change process potentially threatens all previously established ways of doing things, thus creating psychic fears among the practitioners. One of the more prominent fears comes from the risk to ego stemming from open discussion of one’s interpretations, ideas, and judgments. Initiators of action research will use this principle to allay others’ fears and invite participation by pointing out that they, too, will be subject to the same process, and that whatever the outcome, learning will take place.

Plural Structure
The nature of the research embodies a multiplicity of views, commentaries and critiques, leading to multiple possible actions and interpretations. This plural structure of inquiry requires a plural text for reporting. This means that there will be many accounts made explicit, with commentaries on their contradictions, and a range of options for action presented. A report, therefore, acts as a support for ongoing discussion among collaborators, rather than a final conclusion of fact.

Theory, Practice, Transformation
For action researchers, theory informs practice, practice refines theory, in a continuous transformation. In any setting, people’s actions are based on implicitly held assumptions, theories and hypotheses, and with every observed result, theoretical knowledge is enhanced.
The two are intertwined aspects of a single change process. It is up to the researchers to make explicit the theoretical justifications for the actions, and to question the bases of those justifications. The ensuing practical applications that follow are subjected to further analysis, in a transformative cycle that continuously alternates emphasis between theory and practice.

**When is Action Research used?**

Action research is used in real situations, rather than in contrived, experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems. It can, however, be used by social scientists for preliminary or pilot research, especially when the situation is too ambiguous to frame a precise research question. Mostly, though, in accordance with its principles, it is chosen when circumstances require flexibility, the involvement of the people in the research, or change must take place quickly or holistically.

It is often the case that those who apply this approach are practitioners who wish to improve understanding of their practice, social change activists trying to mount an action campaign, or, more likely, academics who have been invited into an organization (or other domain) by decision-makers aware of a problem requiring action research, but lacking the requisite methodological knowledge to deal with it.

**Action Research Cycle**

![Action Research Cycle Diagram]
Current Types of Action Research

By the mid-1970s, the field had evolved, revealing four main ‘streams’ that had emerged: traditional, contextural (action learning), radical, and educational action research.

Traditional Action Research
Traditional Action Research stemmed from Lewin’s work within organizations and encompasses the concepts and practices of Field Theory, Group Dynamics, T-Groups, and the Clinical Model. The growing importance of labour-management relations led to the application of action research in the areas of Organization Development, Quality of Working Life (QWL), Socio-technical systems (e.g., Information Systems), and Organizational Democracy. This traditional approach tends toward the conservative, generally maintaining the status quo with regards to organizational power structures.

Contextural Action Research (Action Learning)
Contextural Action Research, also sometimes referred to as Action Learning, is an approach derived from Trist’s work on relations between organizations. It is contextural, insofar as it entails reconstituting the structural relations among actors in a social environment; domain-based, in that it tries to involve all affected parties and stakeholders; holographic, as each participant understands the working of the whole; and it stresses that participants act as project designers and co-researchers. The concept of organizational ecology, and the use of search conferences come out of contextural action research, which is more of a liberal philosophy, with social transformation occurring by consensus and normative incrementalism.

Radical Action Research
The Radical stream, which has its roots in Marxian ‘dialectical materialism’ and the praxis orientations of Antonio Gramsci, has a strong focus on emancipation and the overcoming of power imbalances. Participatory Action Research, often found in liberationist movements and international development circles, and Feminist Action Research both strive for social transformation via an advocacy process to strengthen peripheral groups in society.

Educational Action Research
A fourth stream, that of Educational Action Research, has its foundations in the writings of John Dewey, the great American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed that professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. Its practitioners, not surprisingly, operate mainly out of educational institutions, and focus on development of curriculum, professional development, and applying learning in a social context. It is often the case that university-based action researchers work with primary and secondary school teachers and students on community projects.

Role of the Action Researcher
Upon invitation into a domain, the outside researcher’s role is to implement the Action Research method in such a manner as to produce a mutually agreeable outcome for all participants, with the process being maintained by them afterwards. To accomplish this, it may necessitate the adoption of many different roles at various stages of the process, including those of:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Planner</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Catalyzer</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
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<tr>
<td>Designer</td>
<td>Listener</td>
<td>Observer</td>
<td>Synthesizer</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
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The main role, however, is to nurture local leaders to the point where they can take responsibility for the process. This point is reached when they understand the methods and are able to carry on when the initiating researcher leaves.

In many Action Research situations, the hired researcher’s role is primarily to take the time to facilitate dialogue and foster reflective analysis among the participants, provide them with periodic reports, and write a final report when the researcher’s involvement has ended.

**Case Study: Development of nature tourism in the Windward Islands**

In 1991, an action research process was initiated to explore how nature tourism could be instituted on each of the four Windward Islands in the Caribbean - St. Lucia, Grenada, Dominica, and St. Vincent. The government took the lead, for environmental conservation, community-based development, and national economic development purposes. Realizing that the consultation process had to involve many stakeholders, including representatives of several government ministries, environmental and heritage groups, community organizations, women’s and youth groups, farmers’ cooperatives, and private business, an action research approach was seen as appropriate.

Two action researchers from York University in Toronto, with prior experience in the region, were hired to implement the project, with a majority of the funding coming from the Canadian International Development Agency. Multi-stakeholder national advisory councils were formed, and national project coordinators selected as local project liaisons. Their first main task was to organize a search conference on each island.

The search conferences took place, the outcome of which was a set of recommendations and/or action plans for the carrying out of a number of nature tourism-oriented sub-projects at the local community level. At this point, extended advisory groups were formed on several of the islands, and national awareness activities and community sub-projects were implemented in some cases.

To maintain the process, regional project meetings were held, where project coordinators and key advisory members shared experiences, conducted self-evaluations and developed plans for maintaining the process (e.g., fundraising). One of the more valuable tools for building a sense of community was the use of a video camera to create a documentary video of a local project.

The outcomes varied. In St. Vincent the research project was highly successful, with several viable local developments instituted. Grenada and St. Lucia showed mixed outcomes, and Dominica was the least successful, the process curtailed by the government soon after the search conference took place. The main difference in the outcomes, it was felt, was in the willingness of the key government personnel to “let go” and allow the process to be jointly controlled by all participants. There is always a risk that this kind of research will empower stakeholders, and change existing power relations, the threat of which is too much for some decision-makers, but if given the opportunity, there are many things that a collaborative group of citizens can accomplish that might not be possible otherwise.