Things to Think About

This chapter will provide a vignette of a teacher's use of action research in her classroom. Her vignette will also illustrate important aspects of the action research process and link back to those aspects in the chapters. We hope this will provide some coherence across the preceding chapters!

Many teachers think of research as a cumbersome and meticulous process involving piles of data and hours of analysis. Further, teachers' attitudes toward research can be complicated: while many teachers find value in research-supported systems and strategies, they often view researchers as being too far removed from classroom practice to really understand what teachers need. This is where teacher-driven Action Research comes in—teachers who act as researchers have the opportunity to be their own guide, potentially influencing teacher praxis in positive and practical ways.

If you find yourself feeling intimidated about conducting your own research, think of the process as very similar to what you already do every day as a teacher. When you consider the steps to Action Research (plan a change, take action, observe, reflect,
repeat), it is easy to see correlations to the teaching cycle. First, teachers must consider their students and develop objectives for the growth they want to see over the course a unit (plan a change). Then, teachers must create a series of strategies to help students make progress (take action); during the learning process, teachers collect data on their students to understand what is working and what is not (observe). Finally, once a unit is over, teachers assess which students made progress and consider how they can help those students who are stuck (reflect). This cycle continues from one unit to the next with teachers modifying their actions to reflect their assessment of the students. Action Research follows in much the same way.

**How Does Action Research Begin?**

My first formal experience with Action Research emerged in the Teachers as Researchers course that I took during my master's program. I used the weekly reflections on the required readings to identify issues to address in my classroom, either through pedagogical changes or adjustments to my curriculum, and I followed the outlined steps to action research to implement a plan, collect data, and develop a report. Yet, what this experience taught me was I was engaging in action research fairly regularly without realizing it. Similar to my experience in graduate school, the action research process in my own classroom often began from reflection–action steps naturally emerged as part of my own teaching cycle, or from yearly evaluations with administration, during which I identified challenges I was experiencing and problem-solved–usually through research–ways to overcome.

In one particular year, after reflecting on my own practice, I realized (rather, admitted) that my junior-level English students did not enjoy our classroom novel studies, resulting in a lack of engagement and poor performance for many of them. The 'start and stop' method–where students read a chapter, then stop to either discuss the chapter or take a quiz–did not replicate how people read books, and it seemed to be destroying my students’ desire to engage with the novels they were assigned. This is where action
research emerged, though if you had asked me at the time, I would not have identified this experience that way.

While the research I conducted in my classroom was not part of formalized project and did not emerge in a linear fashion, I will describe it to you using the outlined steps provided in subsequent chapters to make it clear how your own previous questioning and problem-solving experiences might fit into the action research model.

**Topic Development**

The first important step in any action plan is choosing a topic and understanding what you are hoping to accomplish. If I consider the questions posed in Chapter 2 related to the processes of an action research project, here is what I understood about my chosen topic:

- **Does it address a practical problem?** I wanted to address students’ lack of engagement with classroom novels (research topic). This was a practical problem in an ELA classroom because the curriculum is often built around novel studies, and if students were not engaged with these units, they risked poor performance in the class.

- **Does it generate knowledge?** The goal was to research different whole novel study strategies and implement changes in my own classroom to see which strategies improve engagement.

- **Does it enact change in your pedagogy/classroom/school?** Yes. By addressing this problem in my own classroom first, I could test strategies that worked and develop a plan to share those strategies with colleagues in my ELA department.

- **Is it participatory?** Yes. As the classroom teacher implementing the strategies, I would be actively involved in the research process.

- **Could it be a cyclical process?** Yes. The strategies I implemented could work to improve engagement, but they may not improve overall performance, which would raise new questions for me as I refined the process. Each outcome could generate a new and interesting question to address in the
future. Further, the strategies I develop could have a significant impact on one group of students while showing little effect on a different group, which would also prompt further investigation.

This particular research topic fit in the ‘Improving Classroom Practice’ context because my focus was on changing pedagogical strategies to improve student outcomes. From this point, I had to develop a research question to guide my thinking, knowing this question may change as the research process evolved. For this topic, my research question had three parts: How can I adapt whole novel studies to more closely reflect the natural reading process, take into account each student’s reading level, and improve overall reading performance and engagement? This question was complex, and multi-faceted, which meant it would likely change as the project developed, but it gave me a good place to start because it focused on the three challenges within my chosen topic.

**Understanding the Research**

In a formalized project, the literature review would be a compilation of several pieces of research from different sources that help you understand the research that already exists over your chosen topic. In this example, my next step in this process was to find research on whole novel studies in the classroom and use that information as a catalyst for my own research. I read several articles and one full-length book on alternative methods to whole novel studies, but most of what I could find was based on a middle school classroom. This was good news! It meant, on a large scale, my research would have a place in the broad educational context by filling an existing void in the information available to classroom teachers. On a small scale, this meant other teachers in my own department could benefit from what I design since a lack of resources existed in this area.

**Researching Action**

The action part of the research comes from the literature review and understanding your topic: what are you going to do in your
classroom to address your question? In this example, after reading several examples of alternative methods, I settled on three new strategies I was interested in testing in my classroom:

• **Allow students to read at their own pace**—I held them accountable by asking them to do three things: read 25-30 pages per day, complete 4 sticky note annotations per chapter, and adhere to checkpoints throughout the unit. To support the goal pace, students were given in-class time dedicated to reading, and the only homework assigned during the unit was to read; however, students could read ahead if they wanted, and they were not necessarily punished if they got behind. This addressed part one of my research question: *how can I adapt whole novel studies to more closely reflect the natural reading process?*

• **Sticky Note Annotations with the Three Levels of Thinking** *(literal, inferential, critical)*—Students had to complete four sticky note annotations per chapter with an attempt to demonstrate thinking at all three levels, and I offered extension activities for students who decided to read ahead. This addressed part two of my research question: *how can I adapt whole novel studies to take into account each student’s reading level?*

• **Personalized Writing Prompts**—I allowed students to create their own writing prompts at the end of the unit to demonstrate their knowledge of the novel. This addressed the third part of my research question: *how can I adapt whole novel studies to improve overall reading performance and engagement?*

I implemented these strategies in two different courses, one of which was considered an ‘advanced’ course, with students at all different reading levels. The three strategies allowed for differentiation while also keeping the class on pace to finish the unit at the same time.
Data Collection and Analysis

The data I collected naturally aligned with the three new strategies I adopted for the unit. Since these strategies were all new to the classes, I could isolate my observations on those interventions and compare the outcomes to previous novel studies that did not incorporate these strategies.

Data Collection Methods

I collected data using four different sources throughout the unit: sticky note annotations, reading progress checks, student reflections, and final essays. First, to track progress toward part one of my research question, I monitored student reading engagement by observing their reading in class. Using a scale of 1-4, I recorded student progress toward the daily 30-page reading goal on a spreadsheet. Second, to track students’ understanding of the text, I read their sticky notes for each chapter, noting their level of thinking based on their commentary (literal, inferential, or critical). The goal would be to see students move toward more consistent critical thinking as the novel progressed. Finally, to gauge student engagement and performance, I used a formative assessment in the form of their final essays, and I used a reflection to understand their own feelings about the new method and their progress. These four data sources reflect a combination of qualitative and quantitative data.

Data Triangulation & Analysis

To better understand the efficacy of the new strategies I implemented, I looked at all four sources of data and I discovered that the qualitative data supported what I saw in the quantitative data. When I read student reflections, many mentioned feeling a greater sense of enjoyment throughout the novel study—some of these students admitted to getting behind on the reading at a few points, but concluded that having the final deadline as the only looming one eased their anxiety and allowed them to engage more completely with
the novel as they worked to get caught up. Other students mentioned that they usually disliked annotating texts, but the sticky note process was less intrusive, and actually helpful as they went to plan their own essays. Finally, students enjoyed choosing their own writing prompts because it made them feel more ownership of the unit.

When I looked at my spreadsheets tracking student progress, I could see that students improved on the 1-4 scale over the course of the unit—the few students who were sometimes behind on meeting the daily reading goal had gotten back on track by the end of the unit, and the majority of students had stayed on pace the whole time. Annotations on sticky notes showed an increase in students at the critical thinking level, and their essays were largely more comprehensive and thoughtful than essays for previous novel studies.

Still, like with most things in teaching, not every student showed progress because of these strategies. While the vast majority did improve, there were still students in each class who showed no improvement in meeting the goals of the unit, despite the change in strategies. If I was going to continue this research, my next question in the cycle would begin here.

**Action Implications**

The final step in the process is to consider what the data implies about your research question. What I learned from implementing these new strategies is that adapting the whole novel study process to be more reflective of the natural reading process allowed me the room to take into account students’ different reading levels, which kept them on pace and engaged. By giving students more ownership in the unit, they performed better on assigned tasks, like reading on pace, taking notes regularly, and analyzing the novel at the critical level.

The successful first attempt at changing my practice was exciting because it meant I could (and should) continue to adapt these
strategies each year, refining the process until it meets the needs of all students and generates positive outcomes in all classes. When I set out to change these classroom practices, I did so to benefit my own students, without any plans for taking the research and its outcomes beyond my two walls. However, I have always found the most meaningful professional development for me as a teacher is when I get the opportunity to learn from my peers. It was important to share what was happening in my classroom to give my colleagues that same opportunity.

**Dissemination**

To share my research, I developed a small presentation for my ELA department. I drafted an outline of the strategies, including examples of student work, to provide each teacher, and I spoke at a department meeting about the positive outcomes I had achieved from making these changes. I had several teachers request more information about this process following the presentation.

Dissemination plans do not have to be extensive to be effective. In Chapter 4, we discussed the need to understand your capabilities and realize that change often happens slowly. My research addressed an issue that many teachers in my department were dealing with but it focused just on my classroom, making data collection and analysis manageable. The opportunity for my research to impact more classrooms in my school came from my dissemination plan. I could continue to develop my reach by presenting at a school-wide or district-wide in-service, or I could even plan to present at a local, state, or national conference.

**Conclusions**

Action research is a powerful professional learning tool because it asks you, the teacher, to take a critical look at your own classroom and theorize about your pedagogy, with the understanding that this process is both reflective and fluid. Because action research is unique to your own educational context, it does not look the same for everyone, and each educator’s learning will be distinctive.
Though the example of action research provided here does not reflect a formalized project, it speaks to how teachers naturally engage in the process of questioning and problem-solving to create change for their students. It also demonstrates the value in what teachers discover in their own classrooms. By thinking of the action research process as similar to the teaching cycle, you can more easily step into the role of Teacher Researcher and begin developing a plan to positively impact your classroom.

Recap:
To review, the steps to action research and the corresponding examples presented here are as follows:

1. **Plan a change**: develop the research question and conduct a literature review.
   - *How can I adapt whole novel studies to more closely reflect the natural reading process, take into account each student’s reading level, and improve overall reading performance and engagement?*

2. **Take action**: decide what steps you will take to conduct your research.
   - *Implement three new strategies: allow students to read at their own pace, utilize sticky note annotations, incorporate personalized writing prompts.*

3. **Observe**: collect data on the changes you have implemented.
   - *Use spreadsheet data on reading goal and levels of thinking, student essays, and student reflections.*

4. **Reflect**: consider the results of your study and plan for dissemination.
   - *Develop a presentation for a school department*
5. **Repeat:** consider how your research could continue.

   - Revise the strategies to address students who did not show progress in the unit. Ask more questions.