Action research for improving teaching and learning

What is action research?

Action research is a practical, work-based investigation into an organisational issue. It can be applied to any aspect of the organisation's work, including teaching and learning.

Action research is normally small-scale and involves working collaboratively. It is a cyclical process that requires those conducting the action research to:

- reflect on and assess their practice
- explore and test new ideas/methods/materials
- evaluate how effective their interventions have been.

The outcomes and impact of the action research are shared with colleagues. Decisions can then be taken as to which innovations are adopted more widely by the team or organisation.

Example

Your curriculum team's self-assessment report identifies checking learning as an area for development. You want to investigate, as a team, ways of addressing this. You decide the following plan of action:

- research different methods of checking learning and resources available (including external resources, and expertise and resources from within the team);
- identify a range of approaches to try out or to use more widely within the team;
- agree who will try which approaches and how you will assess their effectiveness;
- set a timetable for completing the above activities;
- team review of outcomes, decisions about further action needed and wider sharing of findings.

The action research cycle
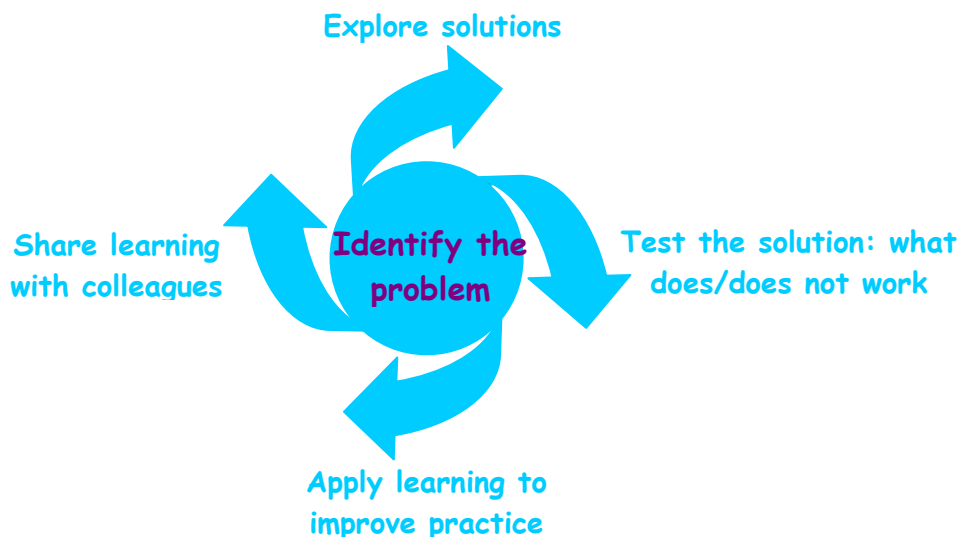
Planning your action research project

The following prompts can help you to plan your action research project. You can use **Sheet 1: Action planning plan** to draw up your plan.

Analysis

- Have you clearly identified the aspect of teaching and learning that your team wants to improve?
- Do you have clear objectives that address the issue?
- Are the improvements you plan to make realistic and achievable?
- Have you considered the impact that the change will have on people and processes?
- Have you used this information to plan an effective strategy?

Planning and preparation

- Have you identified your team?
- Have you developed an action plan for change?
- Are your timescales appropriate, realistic and planned to deliver the objectives?
- Have you allocated sufficient resources?
- Is everyone fully aware of the actions that are planned and of their part in the project?

Implementing, monitoring, adjusting

- Is the plan on track?
- Are you monitoring the change(s) you are making and collecting quantitative and qualitative evidence to prove that effective change has taken place?
- Are you using feedback to test the validity of the change?
- Are you adjusting your plan to take account of changing circumstances or new developments?
- Are you monitoring and recording unexpected outcomes?

Evaluation

- Have you measured your outcomes against objectives?
- Have you captured and analysed unintended outcomes?
- Have you acknowledged and evaluated undesirable outcomes?
- Have you measured the impact of your project on teaching and learning?
- Have you evaluated how you went about your project (the process) and identified how you might do things differently next time?
- What plans do you have to disseminate your project findings?

References

Further details on action research can be found in:

Cousin, S. (2001) How colleges successfully use the process of action research to improve retention and achievement. Learning and Skills Development Agency

Action research plan

Project title:
Project objectives:

Actions	Who?	By when?	Planned outcomes	Impact measures