

# OUR STUDENTS,

# OUR SOLUTIONS

EDUCATORS CAN  
CUSTOMIZE THEIR  
LEARNING THROUGH  
ACTION RESEARCH

BY CRAIG MERTLER

**W**hen I work with educators on the broad topic of job-embedded professional growth, I often ask: Why would you want to try to answer *your* questions or solve *your* problems about *your* students and *your* teaching by using *someone else's* methods, data, and results?

I have spent years studying and facilitating an alternative approach to traditional research that locates the inquiry process in teachers' classrooms.

Action research is any sort of systematic inquiry conducted by those with a direct, vested interest in the teaching and learning process in a particular setting.

Action research is based on the premise that the best way to know if an innovative approach will work with your students or in your classroom is to try it out, collect and analyze data to assess its effectiveness, then make a decision about your next steps based on your direct experience.

In previous writings, I described action research as a process that “allows

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teachers to study their own classrooms ... in order to better understand them and to be able to improve their quality or effectiveness” (Mertler, 2017, p. 4).

Action research is beneficial because it is a continuing process of professional development, rather than a one-shot workshop, and because educators share the responsibility for their own professional learning (Oliver, 1980).

Educators are responsible for identifying the areas they want to improve (known as a problem of practice), designing and implementing innovative approaches for addressing their self-identified problem, collecting and analyzing data as a means of assessing the effectiveness of their innovation, and then reflecting on the process and experience to plan for either executing or revising the approach for future implementation cycles.

This model has greater focus on the learning (which educators themselves construct) as opposed to a focus on training (i.e. information given from an expert to a participant).

### **ACTION RESEARCH COMMUNITIES**

Merging the process of action research with the concept of a professional learning community (PLC) results in an action research community (Mertler, 2016, 2018).

An action research community is a PLC but with a specific focus, a common thread of inquiry that provides the foundation for collaborative teamwork and professional growth (Mertler, 2016, 2018). As such, it shares the same four pillars of any PLC — mission, vision, values, and goals (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) — and the benefits, including:

- Job-embedded professional learning;
- Educator commitment;
- Focus on professional collaboration, in general, but also as it relates to ongoing collective inquiry; and
- Focus on achieving better results for students (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Hord, 1997).

But the distinctive benefit of an action research community is that it provides a common and collaborative focus while still permitting individual educators or collaborative groups of educators to specify their own problems of practice, context, focus, or goals for their use of action research.

Customizing professional development doesn't have to be different for every individual in the action research community, although it can be. For example, action research

communities can foster collaborative action research that includes all teachers in a particular content area, department, or grade level, or that crosses disciplines, grade levels, and perhaps even school buildings.

It is crucial to note that an action research community (like any PLC) is not something educators do for an hour a week. It is more than simply sitting in the faculty lounge and having a conversation about an educational topic. It is a way of approaching and doing the job of being a professional educator, every minute of every day throughout the year.

When educators commit to collaborative professional learning and inquiry, it not only fosters knowledge and skill-building in a community environment, but also becomes an integral part of their daily professional lives (Mertler, 2016).

### **RESEARCH IN ACTION**

To illustrate how an action research community works, consider the case of a rural pre-K-12 school. For some time, the faculty realized that traditional professional development offerings weren't meeting their professional learning needs. After sharing what they learned about action research, several educators launched their own

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action research projects into individual problems of practice, engaging in reflective practice.

After school one day, they met to share their problems and ideas for potential solutions. One of the group was an elementary reading teacher. Her students routinely struggled with demonstrating reading comprehension skills on standardized tests. She focused on designing and implementing different types of assessment activities to enhance students' reading comprehension skills as well as give them experience and practice in responding to item formats that typically appear on standardized assessments.

Two secondary biology teachers had observed students' frustrations and difficulties in their introductory course, especially with vocabulary and concepts in the unit on cell division. Instead of using routine lectures to present the material, the educators used online simulations then assessed how well the simulations helped students master these concepts.

After these and other teachers shared their respective problems and plans for action research projects, they discussed how they might help each other. Realizing that their problems of practice were very different but focused on the same ultimate goal of improved student performance, they committed to support one another as fellow action researchers working in the same school with the same students. That support would include serving as sounding boards for ideas, providing constructive feedback, and lending moral support.

The group met regularly on the second and fourth Thursday of each month. During these meetings, they provided updates and status reports on individual projects, discussed goals they hoped to achieve, and posed at least one question about some aspect of their project with which they were struggling. Between meetings, they would test out

the ideas and suggestions, reflect, and plan for next steps.

## CREATING THE CULTURE

Implementing an action research community effectively requires creating a conducive culture. To do this, three components are essential:

**Educators must embrace reflective practice.** Examining problems of practice and engaging in the deep thinking about causes and potential solutions requires a re-examination of long-held professional belief systems and a hard look at the various roles traditionally held by teachers, administrators, and students.

The ineffective one-size-fits-all model of professional learning has traditionally represented safe professional learning in that educators typically weren't required or encouraged to engage in any risk-taking in their own individual growth.

In contrast, embracing reflective practice requires a commitment by courageous professional educators who are willing to critically examine their own practices, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes (Mertler, 2016). This means that there will sometimes be challenges — perhaps even failures — but courageous educators see these as opportunities for further growth and learning.

**Commitment and time are essential.** In an action research community, planning, collaboration, and professional learning can't be crammed into 30- to 60-minute increments at the beginning or end of the day. The commitment requires an "all day, every day" attitude toward professional growth, development, and learning, even though meetings among the members of the community take place at specific times.

**Leadership at the building level is vital.** In particular, leaders should focus on building and sustaining the

commitment of faculty and staff and tying the work to the school's mission, vision, and goals. Faculty and staff must know and see, on a daily basis, that the principal and assistant principals are equally committed to the learning community's overall success and that they will be supportive of faculty and staff needs.

If the proposed action research community is a districtwide effort, then district-level administrators play an essential role as well. They must be able to promote and facilitate not only enhanced student learning, but also improvements in adult learning, and to emphasize the importance of reflective practice and self-guided inquiry into context-specific teaching and learning.

These three cultural components are evident in the action research community example described earlier. First, participants engaged in reflective practice — focusing on their practice and how to improve it, critically examining how they taught content and interacted with students, integrating feedback from colleagues, and taking risks to try new ways of working.

Second, participants demonstrated commitment and time to the process of supporting each other. That commitment extended not only to the regular Thursday afternoon meetings, but also to doing the work between those meetings, being accountable to each other for continued progress on their projects, and supporting each other throughout the process.

Third, they had the support of the building administration. Not only did the principal routinely check on each participant's progress with his or her project, but she also encouraged participants to share what they were doing at schoolwide faculty meetings.

## UNLIMITED OPPORTUNITIES

Because action research is

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**principals.** We believed that one of the key influences to the success of this literacy plan was the knowledge and instructional leadership of principals, so we redesigned monthly principal meetings, which had been mainly focused on lists of business items. We designed a series of one-hour modules, each of which related to one aspect of our literacy plan. To create consistency, we asked principals to lead this same module with their teachers sometime within the next month.

## IMPACT ON TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The new research-based literacy plan and the professional learning support quickly began to change teachers' and leaders' practices and

within three years had real impact on student outcomes.

Before implementing this model, elementary achievement scores on the Missouri Assessment Program test were typically below the state average in most grade levels. Since then, all grade levels have performed significantly above state averages for four consecutive years, and this includes English learners and the free and reduced lunch population.

Because the state implemented a new assessment in spring 2018, we can't make direct score comparisons before and after the 2017-18 school year, but we know that all groups of students continue to perform above state averages.

Finally, since implementing this model, three schools have been

recognized as National Blue Ribbon schools between 2016 and 2018, and five schools were among the top 25 elementary schools in Missouri in the 2016-17 school year. The district had not achieved either of these distinctions before 2016.

Our experience shows that it pays to invest in teachers and leaders becoming the very best they can be so that students become the best that they can be.

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customizable, action research communities provide opportunities for schools to target a wide variety of reform initiatives and innovations, even at the most micro levels.

Whereas some schools might focus their professional learning communities on highly specific curricular or social initiatives, schools that operate as action research communities can target a variety of initiatives and problems of practice.

Furthermore, the focus of an action research community can evolve over time, even while the infrastructure remains intact, theoretically for decades. The fundamental structure of an action research community — which includes a focus on research, collaboration, and support — serves as a flexible and powerful mechanism for achieving

an unlimited number of school improvement and reform initiatives.

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