

ACTION RESEARCH



TOOL

What is it?

Action research is an approach to research that is most often applied in the social sciences, and it is done both “by” and “for” those taking action. It generates rich, qualitative data and insights. Action research sets aside the idea of a researcher being a neutral observer of a situation, and instead acknowledges everyone involved in a process as active co-creators of both research and action. Action research directly connects the processes of research and action together, in real time, while seeking transformative change. It has a direction and an ambition.

When is it used?

Even though there is a very rich collection of qualitative research methods to draw from, much attention is being paid to ethnography as the preferred method in design and social innovation processes. Ethnography has a problematic history, with many researchers holding white, male, class, and other privileges extracting information from their observations of Indigenous, African, and other cultures and then interpreting their observations through their own lenses, often with deeply ill-informed and often racist results. Although Indigenized and critical race-centred approaches to ethnography are emerging, this problematic history of extraction and mis-interpretation means that the use of this research method in innovation processes needs to be questioned. Ethnography as practice in innovation processes is also deeply concerned with collecting rich data about individual user experiences, and using this to guide insight gathering. Although this is one important type of experience, particularly in convening questions concerned with improving the health and wellbeing of individuals, there are many other problem types that take a systems orientation, and where ethnography might not be the most appropriate choice.

Because of this, the SLab toolkit recommends action research as a useful qualitative research method to employ. Action research democratizes the process, and requires ongoing critical reflection of those involved in the research to be a key part of the process. There is not a divide between the “researcher” and the “researched”, instead everyone is involved in action, reflection, and insight generation.

How to use it:

The SLab toolkit includes three approaches that work for action research: observations and insights; empathy interviews; and learning journeys. There is also a bundle of documentation worksheets that give you a variety of ways to gather the insights that your action research is generating. All of these methods require a commitment to understanding the positionality of yourself and your team, which you will have explored in your design brief, so take some time to critically reflect on this before beginning your action research. It is important to consider and articulate how you will ensure that an ethical approach is taken in your action research strategy. Universities have ethics research boards that can provide some useful guidance about how to think about a right-sized ethics strategy for your process.

There are many, many other interesting qualitative research methods to explore at this stage in your innovation process. If this one isn't feeling quite right, then hit the library, pick up a recent qualitative research methods text, and dive in to see what you find.

More info:

JOURNAL ARTICLE: [An Overview of Action Research](#)

WEBSITE: [Participatory Methods](#)

