

# What is good action research: Quality choice points with a refreshed urgency

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## Refreshing our purpose with *Action Research* journal

Our purpose since inception with this international, peer-reviewed journal is to offer a forum for participative, action-oriented inquiry into questions that matter—questions relevant to people in the conduct of their lives, that enable them to flourish in their organizations and communities, and that evince a deep concern for the wider ecology. Our purpose has not changed. The world around the journal, however, has changed.

Globally there is much to celebrate. Poverty rates are falling. We humans are living longer. The notion—if not always the practice—of human rights for all continues to expand. Yet, the 2018 IPCC Special Report on Global Warming gives us 12 years before catastrophic environmental breakdown becomes our shared reality; moreover wealth and resources are increasingly concentrating, as highlighted by the 2016 World Social Science Report (ISSC, IDS, & UNESCO, 2016). Our local and global challenges are now far too important to leave it to the certified experts alone. Actions researcher are called to play an important role.

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Action research is a catalyst to successfully transmute the inexhaustible resource of human creativity in all spaces—self to society—toward addressing our global problems. As outlined in more detail in the editorial to the Special Issue on Action Research and Climate Transformations (Bradbury et al., 2019), mitigating the worst requires action research that draws on many other kinds and sources of knowledge. In fact, it requires drawing much more from diverse people on the ground who understand the problems at hand and can offer solutions anchored in their experience of what is meaningful for them.

The journal editors have recently launched an inquiry into how better to use the journal in support of action research for a more sustainable or regenerative society—one in which many more of our efforts may be treated as learning experiments toward the kinds of societal transformations our planet requires. Such a world might be envisaged as one in which the UN's call to Sustainable Development Goals is realized. What does this mean for our practice as board members? One important step, we decided, is to refresh the criteria, the choice points for quality, by which we assess papers as they move toward publication. Our aim in refreshing these choice points is, therefore, to support increasing clarity with regard to key transformative, actionable aspects of action research so as to enable more action research to build upon this momentum.

### **Acknowledging a new urgency: Refreshing the quality choice points**

At *Action Research* journal, we remain committed to offering a viable alternative to dominant “disinterested” models of social science, and unreflective forms of everyday practice. We have always welcomed—and would like to see even more—articles from practitioners outside academia. We aim to publish action research at the meeting point between local knowledge generation and meaningful action.

In the Conclusion to the 2001 edition of *The Handbook of Action Research* (Bradbury & Reason, 2001), the journal's editor in chief began a process of articulating choice points for improving the quality of action research. As a board, we have since found it useful to develop these into seven quality choice points which we use throughout the peer review process for assessing and developing all papers that authors offer to us for publication. These quality choice points are considered some of the most useful and transparent review criteria in social science journals of our type.

These choice points have also helped produce a stunning array of high impact action research, in local and global spaces, and increasingly inter-connecting. Many examples can be seen in the publications in this journal as well as in the associated *Handbooks of Action Research* (Bradbury, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p. 208) and the more accessible Cookbooks (Bradbury & AR+ Associates, 2017). For example, we read the detailed account of transformation of an entire

healthcare system designed around patient needs in Sweden (Lifvergren & Zandee, 2017) which shows the importance of learning platforms and stakeholder dialogue that adds up to large-scale Action Research whose impact continues. Or we may read of action research in mainland China (Ku, 2011), where action research is a key strategy for social workers to empower villagers in challenging unequal power relationships in economic development in the context of environmental injustice in post-disaster community rebuilding. While transformational work has always been our focus, now we also ask: How can we support action researchers in deepening and speeding up the proliferation of good work; how can a local niche experiment connect to global reach? How can we collaborate, quickly and effectively, in supporting the realization of regenerative civilizations?

We believe that in updating the choice points, we continue to support this new urgency for clarity and methodologies that support transformation. The times demand it.

### **Invitation to Action Research journal stakeholders**

We now invite all future authors to send articles which show multiple ways of knowing and declaring truths; we urge you to show how you yoke your efforts to a commitment to inquiry that makes a positive difference. We ask that you show us how you work with others determines anew the boundary lines about whose knowledge matters, whose methodology counts, and how these questions are at the root of our survival and potential thriving as a learning species. Show us the courage it takes to engage with the power dynamics that hold us on yesterday's unsustainable paths. Help us understand where and why you have fallen short. We know that to do good work means always falling short of our ideals, yet remaining committed and learning along the way.

Of our stakeholders more broadly, i.e., authors, reviewers, readers, we ask your help in finalizing the next iteration of the seven quality choice points. For this, we invite you to follow up in the more interactive blog space of AR+ where you will find the following—draft version—of seven choice points linked to a survey that invites your participation. You may access AR+ at <https://actionresearchplus.com>

### **Seven choice points for quality in action research, March 2019**

#### 1. Articulation of objectives

- The extent to which the authors explicitly address their purpose with knowledge creation through and for action in support of our collective thriving on this planet.
- Authors show the choices they have made in meeting these objectives.

#### 2. Partnership and participation

- The extent to and means by which the paper reflects or enacts participative values and concern for questions of “whose knowledge counts?”

- By the extent of participation we are referring, in the relational component of research, to a continuum from consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers, including multiple ways of knowing-for-action.
3. Contribution to action research theory/practice  
The extent to which the paper builds on, and or creates explicit links with, and or contributes to a wider body of practice knowledge and or theory, that clearly contributes meaningful new action research knowledge and insights in the action research literature.
  4. Methods and process
    - The extent to which the action research process and related methods are clearly articulated and illustrated. By illustrated we mean that empirical papers “show” and not just “tell” by including analysis of data along with the voices of participants in the research.
    - Papers demonstrate knowledge creation that includes and transcends rationalist empiricism to acknowledges whole persons as relational beings.
  5. Actionability  
The extent to which the action research conveyed through the paper provides new ideas that guide action in response to need.
  6. Reflexivity
    - The extent to which self-location as a change agent is acknowledged by the authors. By self-location, we mean that authors take a personal, involved and self-critical stance as reflected in clarity about their role in the action research process, clarity about the context in which the research takes place, and clarity about what led to their involvement in this research.
    - That the knowledge creation integrates personal/reflexive, interpersonal/relational, and impersonal knowledge, thereby growing those involved and empowering participants in social change to shape the social world of their aspirations.
  7. Significance
    - The extent to which the insights in the manuscript are significant in content and process.
    - By significant content we mean having meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology (i.e., generates both local and public knowledge).
    - By process we mean involvement of stakeholders’ through strategies and methods that connect people and knowledges in ways that help them develop a strong and authentic sense of development and evolution in their practices, their understandings of their practices, and the transformation of the situations in which they practice.

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