

Practitioner Action Research
07.541/301 Spring 2012

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Course Description

Action Research for Practitioners (07.541/031) is designed to prepare educational practitioners (whether in schools or other organizations) in the rudiments of Action Research. In this class students will learn how to identify a problem for inquiry, design a study, collect and analyze data, and develop research grounded recommendations and an action plan for solving that problem. In this class, we will primarily be using qualitative or non-numerical data and analysis techniques, an appropriate approach for going deep in unique situations with limited participants. Throughout the course, strong emphasis is placed on developing an understanding of the ethical issues related to the conduct of research. Students who complete this class should have the skills and experience to undertake individual or collective studies, evaluate research work of others, and coach or consult with others who would like to use these methods to improve their practice.

Course Organization

Beliefs and Principles Undergirding the Course

Educators are experts about the worlds in which they work. *Action research is a means by which they can systematically inquire and reflect about that world, and share their deep knowledge of children, learning, and schools with others.*

Educators are smart people. *They have the capacity to inquire, reflect, and produce powerful knowledge about education. Action research provides them with tools to do so.*

Educators care about the quality of education. *Teachers and administrators who work day-to-day in schools and other educational settings care deeply about the quality of their work and the impact it has on others and their future lives. Action research provides tools for them to improve the quality of instruction and the organization of educational settings*

Educators are committed to the ongoing process of improvement *These methods can serve as the basis for ongoing reflective practice, anchoring educational reform goals in thoughtfulness and creating the means for continuing collaboration among*

members of a school community.

This course has been designed to be informative, thought-provoking, collaborative, and joyous. It is my aim that each participant in the course will be invigorated by the experience and that it will lead to a sense of personal and professional renewal. *Thank you for joining me in this journey!*

Overview of Course Structure

The focus of the course work will be a semester-long action research project. Each student will conduct an individual project related to an area of personal/professional concern. While this may seem a bit overwhelming at the outset, the course is designed so that we take each piece in small, carefully explained steps, which all lead toward the final product. Moreover, the course is highly collaborative in nature, providing opportunities for students to help each other toward the final goal.

Organization of Semester

The semester is divided into four major sections:

Part I: What is Action Research? How do I get Started?

In the first section of the semester, you will explore what action research is and how practitioners use it to improve practice and build educational knowledge. In this section you will learn processes for selecting and honing a topic for study and building a plan for data collection. You will also examine critical standards for the ethical conduct of research. These activities will lead you to the production of a mini-research proposal that describes what you will investigate and how you will do so.

Part II: Data Collection

As you undertake your study you will delve into the exploration of several data collection techniques that have proven to be particularly useful for practitioners: observation; open-ended interviewing; and the use of various kinds of visual data. Other techniques appropriate to the various studies under development will also be discussed. You will explore each technique one-by-one, collecting a sample of data, sharing it with class colleagues, and reviewing and improving your understanding of this form of data and the way it contributes to learning about your topic. In this way you will develop expertise in several methods, as well as building case knowledge of the different ways the approaches could be employed.

Part III: Analysis

In the third segment of the semester, students will learn how to look within and across forms of data and cases to analyze their materials and develop trustworthy findings. You

will also learn how to use the findings of your study as the foundation for building research-grounded action-implementation plans.

Part IV: Action and Communication

In the last section of the semester, you will use the findings of your inquiry to an action plan based upon research-grounded recommendations. You will also develop a presentation by which to effectively communicate your findings, recommendations, and suggested method for future action.

PLEASE NOTE:

This course has been set up like a real research project. This means that it is very hands-on—you are collecting data and analyzing it from the outset. As is often the case in research, the research process is also highly collaborative. You will be working closely with others to test your notions of what something means against theirs. Do they understand the problem the same way? What do they see in your data?

For these reasons, you will need to be able to check-in frequently to post and respond to the coursework. This is not the kind of class where you can wait until the last minute, read the text, and pass the test. Nor is it the kind of class where you can sit quietly in the background while others carry on the discussion.

Having said all of this, I can reassure you that this is the kind of class that lets you follow your passion. There is a lot of structure in regard to when things are due, how they should be formatted, etc., but there is a lot of openness in deciding the focus of your inquiry and in pushing you to go deeper in your interpretation of an issue. I hope I strike a good balance between the two!

Texts

We will be using texts that are available electronically from the UMass-Lowell Library or other sources. Please refer to the section on “Text” in the Start Here materials.

Assignments

For this class there are multiple assignments designed to help you understand how to design and conduct an action research study. These include assignments related to initiating and designing a study; collecting data, analyzing the collected data, and developing research-grounded action plans and communication tools.

You will also receive detailed information on the expectations for each kind of assignment in the various weeks where the assignments are introduced.

Chats

Please see the section on “Chats” in the Star Here materials.

Grading and Expectations

The overall grading for the semester will be based upon the following scale:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>GPA</i>	<i>GSE point structure</i>	<i>Comment</i>
A+	4.0	99-100	Work of the highest professional standard demonstrating independent and exemplary performance
A	4.0	96-98	Excellent work demonstrating independent and high quality performance.
A-	3.7	91-95	Very good work, carefully executed, but requiring some areas of improvement.
B+	3.3	86-90	Good work, indicating careful thought and attention to the task, yet requiring several areas of improvement.
B	3.0	80-85	Work of graduate standard, but omissions exist or careful analysis is not in evidence.
Below Graduate Standard			
B-	2.7	76-79	Effort is evident, but work indicates lack of understanding of the demands of the task
C+	2.3	70-75	Poor quality work with little attention to detail and the demands of the task.
C	2.0	65-69	Work of very poor quality, indicating no understanding of the depth of analysis required.
F	0.0	Below 65	Serious neglect or evidence of cheating.

Ethics in a Research Class

While there are many benefits possible from research, there are also dangers—to the researched, the researcher, and the organizations and communities in which the research is conducted. It is our goal in conducting research to cause no harm to anyone—whether willfully or through our own ignorance of the implications of our acts. We will be discussing ethical issues in class, so that you will be aware of the do's and don't's.

Because you will be conducting action research, that is, research on your classroom or within your organization, others will be aware of the site at which you are working. I will ask you to “anonymize” your information as much as possible. For that reason, I also ask that researchers always speak with respect in regard to their participants. You may disagree with actions you observe or opinions you learn about in an interview, but your goal is to understand, not evaluate or criticize.

It is also essential that everyone in the class abide by the standards of confidentiality that each action researcher has promised to their participants. This means that you **MAY**

NOT share information you glean from class discussions about the activities or performance of research participants with others outside of the class.

If you have concerns or issues with an ethical aspect of the class discussion, you may raise it in class (the discussion of ethical issues is an important part of learning to do research) and/or you may bring it to me. If you are confused about why someone did something, ask them with real openness. Do not assume or jump to conclusions about their behavior without giving them a chance to respond and think through the issue with you. If any actions need to be taken in regard to ethical conduct—that is for me to do, not you.

PLEASE NOTE: Back channeling from course members to participants (relaying information discussed in class to a non-class member who is a participant in another student's study) **will not be tolerated** and may be considered grounds for dismissal from the course.

Plagiarism and Academic Misconduct

It should go without saying that all work you submit will be original, that is, you have taken no portion of it from the work of another without due attribution. If you are unsure about the definition of plagiarism, please refer to the University catalog.

It should also go without saying that all data collected will be authentic, that is, it will not be fabricated. If you have questions about this form of academic misconduct, please refer to the UML catalog for definitions and a description of the punishment.

Education for Transformation

Conceptual Framework of the Graduate School of Education, University of Massachusetts-Lowell

*The central tenets of our conceptual framework are
Excellence, Equity, Inquiry and Collaboration*

In this class I interpret the framework in this way:

Excellence: The nature of this class—an inquiry into an issue of personal/professional interest—never fails to draw out students' best efforts. I am continually impressed by the curiosity and intensity with which class members participate. The class is structured so that this excellence is a shared commodity, that is, we seek to bring everyone up to the highest level of achievement.

Equity: The projects students undertake in this class seek to solve the hard problems of education, most of which are directly aimed at increasing the equity of educational settings and ensuring better learning for all. Within the course, I am always on the look-

out for ways to provide all students with the attention they need to do their best work. I also seek to insure that no student is excluded, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Inquiry: Inquiry is at the heart of this course. This course is dedicated to developing students' skills and inclinations in the arena of educational inquiry. I hope you will leave with a strong appreciation for the value that inquiry has to the educational endeavor.

Collaboration: There are many opportunities for meaningful collaboration in this class. You will be working with class colleagues to improve your work and develop interpretation of your collected materials. Their comments and suggestions will prove invaluable to your work, and likewise, your comments and suggestions will help your class colleagues to improve their work, clarify their meaning, and better communicate their results.

Thank you for joining us this semester. I look forward to the journey with you.