

Action Research Dissertation

In the Department of Teaching and Curriculum, we strive to prepare doctoral students who can make a difference in individual lives as well as in their fields through research that generates a new understanding of education and human development and in which more effective education policies and practices can be grounded. One way to achieve this goal is to conduct research on one's own practice or within one's own organization; therefore, students in our Accelerated Ed.D. program use action research as their research methodology. Action research requires the researcher to begin with an educational problem to analyze, to develop a plan of critically informed action to improve on what is happening, to act to implement the plan, to observe the effects of the action, and then to reflect on these effects as basis for further planning. Most importantly, action research is "inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 3).

Over the last half century action research has taken various forms and been called by different names. In the United States it is sometimes referred to as practitioner or teacher research. In the Warner School, we use a form of action research intended as a collective inquiry, in which doctoral students and faculty engage in inquiry to improve their own social and educational practices as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices occur.

Based on this conception of action research, the action research dissertation should be written with the intention of improving policy and practice and to fulfill the following goals:

1. To learn and use research methods that are linked to teaching, learning, and curriculum, including the ability to analyze and solve problems of practice; to understand the research literature and apply it appropriately.
2. To apply concepts and theories to existing or predicted educational problems.
3. To work with researchers and practitioners to design and carry out projects that can be put into practice to improve education.

A committee composed of the faculty member who teaches the Dissertation Seminar/cohort advisor, and two other committee members will evaluate the project. Individualized feedback on multiple drafts of each dissertation proposal and final dissertation will be provided to the candidate by the committee. Candidates need to defend their dissertation proposal and obtain RSRB approval (for projects involving human subjects) before collecting data. The dissertation project will be due by April of year three and it must be defended by the Warner graduation deadline.

During their second year in the program, students will take a course on Action Research methodology where they will design an action research project in their educational setting. From that semester through to finished dissertations, students and faculty will support one another in identifying educational problems to be analyzed, developing and implementing a plan of action, and reflecting on and evaluating its effects. After the

completion of the first cohort, one day will be set aside so that students can present the process and results of their action research dissertation.

Sample Dissertation Proposal Outline for Action Research Dissertations

Raffaella Borasi – July 22, 2008

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION (*Statement of the problem and its significance; brief description of your specific study – i.e., research questions and design*)

- **What is your study about – i.e., what problem(s) is your study going to address, how, and why?** (*This should include both a brief identification of the problem that motivates the study, and the goals of the study – i.e., what you hope to accomplish*)
- **What is action research and what are the implications of deciding to use action research as your methodology?** (*i.e., what kind of study are you going to propose for your dissertation and how it will differ from more traditional dissertation studies?*)
- **What is the theoretical framework informing this study – i.e., what assumptions are you making and/or from what perspectives are you going to approach this problem?** (*just identify them – you can go into more details about the support in the literature in the next chapter*)
- **Given this theoretical framework – and possibly some preliminary studies – what are the research questions your study is going to address?**
- **How are you going to address these questions and why?** (*do this very briefly, just to give a sense of the study – a more detailed description will follow in Ch.3/4 – this should include a brief description of both the intervention and the data sources; make sure you include a statement about adopting an action research method and why it seems appropriate for the study*)
- **What potential contributions/implications can this study have for the field?**
- **How is the rest of this document organized?**

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW (*What we already know that is relevant to the problem under study and informed the dissertation study*)

- **What does this literature review cover, why, and how is it organized?** (*This introduction is critical to orient the reader and allow you to make explicit upfront why you chose to cover certain things versus others, and their relevance to your study*)
- **What support for your theoretical framework can you find in the literature?** (*do this only for the most essential elements of your theoretical framework; use this also as an opportunity to identify key elements of your theoretical framework that have implications for your study, and make those implications explicit*)
- **What do we already know about the problem under study from existing research, and what implications does this knowledge have for the study? What are the “gaps”, i.e., what do we NOT know yet about the problem, and how is the proposed study going to address some of these gaps?**

- *(when appropriate)* What do we know from previous studies that can help us design a more effective intervention?

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN *(In details, what you plan to do to address your research questions and the rationale for these decisions)*

Introduction:

- What is your study? *(Only if a reminder seems needed)*
- How is this chapter organized, and what is the function/goal of each section?

Choice of methodology:

- What are the basic tenets of action research?
- Why did you choose this approach for your study?

Context:

- What is the context (i.e., district, school, agency, program, grant project, etc.) in which you will conduct the study?
- What are characteristic elements of that context that are most relevant for your study?
- Why did you choose this context?
- *(if relevant)* How is your study going to be influenced by this choice?
- What is your own role and how does that position you as a researcher?

Overall design:

- What are your research questions? (in some cases, you may be able now to state them in more detail than in the introduction)
- What is the overall design of your study to address these question? (only if it seems needed – if so, include both a brief description of the intervention, its rationale, and identify key data sources)

Participants' recruitment:

- How will you recruit and select participants, and ensure all Human Subjects regulations are met?

(If relevant) Plan for the proposed intervention:

- What is the detailed plan for the intervention, and what is the rationale for each of the key design decisions?

Data collection and analysis:

- **What data are you going to collect, how and why?** (this needs to be VERY DETAILED, with careful justification for each decision made)
- **How will this data, when taken together, allow you to address all your research questions?**
- **How will you analyze these data to address each research question?** (if at all possible, identify some “initial codes” you will be using to organize the data, while remaining open to changes)

Methodology “check”:

- **How is the study you designed meeting the key tenets of action research?** (Make sure you address each of the tenets you identified at the beginning of the chapter; some discussion of your positionality could be here, unless you fully addressed this issue in the “context” subsection)

APPENDICES. (Additional documentation as needed -- to support points you have made in the text, or describe/show specific research tools you will be using, for the readers’ examination)

NOTE: With minor modifications, these will also be the first chapters of your dissertation, to which you will be likely to add:

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS (*this may take more than one chapter depending on the study and the data*)

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS (*What you have learned about your research questions and the problem under study more generally, and how this can contribute to the research literature and to improve practice*)