

Arts Research Seminar Report

No 3: Action Research in the Arts: Current and Future Uses

Phyllida Shaw and Mary Tennant report on the third Arts Research Seminar held at the University of Sussex on 21 September 2001

'This hurts,' complained one of the participants, during the first break for coffee. 'I haven't had to think this hard in months.' Creating pain is not one of the declared objectives of Arts Research Seminars, but they are designed to take participants on a journey into what is sometimes unfamiliar territory and to enable them to have thought-provoking conversations on the way. We knew that a seminar on action research would be a challenging one, because there is, as yet, no shared understanding of what the term means or what the process involves, in an arts context. Nor is there any consensus about the usefulness of action research to artists, arts organisations, audiences and funders.

The term action research has been cropping up with increasing frequency within the arts funding system, with the knock-on effect that arts organisations, artists, evaluators and consultants have started to use it too. Rather like social inclusion, action research is a concept that provokes strong reactions, for and against. For some it is the big new idea: a more accessible and democratic way of discovering new knowledge; a way that challenges the traditional hierarchy of the researcher and the researched, with the researcher acting as a facilitator of change. For others it is the ultimate suit of emperor's new clothes. It is what all good research should be: transparent, hands-on, inclusive and involving, with findings that are widely disseminated. For some, action research is just another term for formative evaluation, in which an organisation sets itself an objective, evaluates its progress towards that objective and is ready to change course mid stream as a result.

At least part of the tension created by discussion of action research is due to our failure to define it. But it goes deeper than that. Action research is the eco-warrior of the research world, climbing trees, seeing things that others cannot see, and challenging the assumptions of the arts research establishment.

This seminar (the third in a series of five) was organised by Arts Research Limited in collaboration with Janet Summerton and Madeline Hutchins from the Centre for Arts and Cultural Management Studies at the University of Sussex. It attracted the third full house in a row: a mixture of officers from the Arts Councils of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and the regional arts boards, local authority officers, arts managers, artistic directors, and specialists in the arts and criminal justice, education and youth work; marketing and audience development professionals and teachers and students of arts management. This was the most diverse group of participants in an Arts Research Seminar to date and the quality of debate was high.

Following an introduction by the Chair, Robert Hutchison, Chief Executive of Southern Arts, the discussion continued in smaller groups, each with a facilitator. Three briefing papers had been circulated beforehand. These were written by Michael

Eraut, who teaches public sector management at the University of Sussex; Keith Hackett, co-author of *Banking on Culture*, an action research project involving 80 different groups, and Catherine Rose, Education Director of Eastern Touring Agency. The authors all defined and valued action research slightly differently, which may have reassured participants who later found themselves disagreeing on precisely those points.

The following paraphrased comments illustrate the range of definitions of action research suggested by participants and highlight those aspects of the process that they thought important:

- Action research is a research style, not a research tool. It is a style of research undertaken with and for the participants in a project.
- Action research is a process of collaborative enquiry. It involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and planning again.
- Action research is about testing a hypothesis by designing a project around it and seeing how it goes. A pilot project is a piece of action research.
- Action research is about people; people doing things and telling each other about it.
- Action research is about sharing power. It is about social change.
- Action research devalues research skills. It pretends that anyone can do it, but that's dishonest. Someone is always in control.
- Evaluation is not the same as action research. It is part of the process of action research.
- Action research is a creative, iterative process wholly appropriate to arts practice.

The discussion groups spent several hours getting to grips with the strengths and weaknesses of action research. One concern was that although a 'process of collaborative inquiry' sounds good, if results are to be accepted by funders and policy makers, the process would need to be led by someone with experience of designing and conducting research and of using different methods of data gathering and analysis. How different would that be from any other research project? One response offered was that in action research, every contribution to the process is given equal value but again there was doubt that such objectivity is possible.

Based on this kind of exchange, recommendations were made for ensuring effective collaboration. It was accepted that collaboration requires generosity, open minds, flexibility, project management, facilitation and communication skills. A freeflow of information was cited as essential. All participants in an action research project need to keep each other fully informed and in a language that is accessible. Arts practitioners and academics need to be particularly alert to the use of inaccessible language. Research processes need to be debated, not 'taught'. While there may be a role for mentors, great care must be taken not to introduce a hierarchy of experience. Everyone interested enough to be taking part will be motivated to learn. Those with more experience need to be open to the likelihood that they will be learning too.

The question of validation came up throughout the day. One

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person pointed out that while academic research is 'peer reviewed' there are currently no such checks applied to research commissioned by the arts funding system, local authorities or even DCMS. As a result, reports of research findings vary wildly in quality. The issue of validation for action research was therefore thought, by some, to be a red herring. Others thought it vital to the credibility of action research as a process.

The experience of 'planning for real' was cited. This is a process that enables people with no experience of planning, building or fundraising to decide and then to articulate how they would like their environment to change. It goes on to provide the tools to increase the likelihood of turning those wishes into reality. Planning departments throughout the country are working with communities that have learned how to plan the built environment and there is no reason why local authorities and arts funding bodies should not be listening to communities making recommendations on the basis of action research in the arts.

It was accepted that action research involves much greater risk than commissioning a single researcher or research team. Typically, the researcher recommends a methodology and analyses the data. The commissioning body may be involved in the interpretation of findings and almost always controls the dissemination of those findings. In this way, the results of the research process, no matter how inclusive it has been, are tightly controlled. The question of dissemination is particularly sensitive. Many researchers have been involved in commissioned (as opposed to self-generated) work that has been edited for public consumption. One of the consequences of action research is that more people are involved and playing down unpalatable findings is more difficult. Action research challenges not only the way in which research is conducted, but also has implications for the dissemination of findings. Action research makes it more likely that something will change as a result.

One participant in the seminar was surprised to find, on sale, a report of a project in which he had been involved. He had no idea that the project had been the subject of research. This implies either that the research was covert, or that the researcher did not visit the project and meet participants, or that the managers of the project did not share with others involved the fact that research was taking place. Action research, by contrast, is a much more self-conscious process in which everyone who contributes knows what he or she is contributing to.

Hopes and fears

Participants considered their hopes and fears for action research in the arts. Among the hopes were that action research, if acknowledged by policy makers and funders as a valid form of inquiry, could lead to significant shifts in arts policy and practice. Professional researchers involved in action research projects could have a much fuller experience and understand the work more completely. Action research could raise the status of participants

in arts projects as proactive and critical individuals with an influence over the shape of future projects. There was hope that action research in the arts might also strengthen the reputation of the arts sector as a sector that reflects on its practice and that lessons learned in one project, in one part of the country, might be shared further afield. It was hoped that action research would be respected for recognising failure as well as success.

The doubts and fears included continuing confusion about what action research is; concern that the funding system may be paying lip service to this new approach, because it reflects the government's current focus on social inclusion and not because it believes that the findings of action research are as valid as the findings of any other style of research; doubt that many organisations have the courage or confidence to act on results that would involve a radical shift in direction; and a concern that other types of research might be seen as hierarchical and old fashioned.

Suggested guidelines for effective action research

- Decide whether action research is the appropriate style of research. It won't always be. There will, for example, be circumstances in which it is not appropriate to reveal the purpose of a research project, eg a reduction in youth crime as a result of participation in arts activity.
- The objectives of the research need to be agreed by all participants, at the outset.
- Show respect for different points of view and an understanding of group dynamics and processes.
- The principles of learning, empowerment and equal status for all participants should be clearly stated. There are no guinea pigs here.
- Only accept funding on condition that the findings will be disseminated.
- Leadership of action research projects should be transferable.
- Aim for the highest levels of honesty, transparency and accuracy
- Ensure an atmosphere of trust and guarantee confidentiality where necessary.
- Ensure that the findings have a public form, whether a report, exhibition, performance, conference, training programme or other event.
- Ensure some form of follow-up, so that all the researchers involved continue to be informed about the wider impact of their work.

And finally, a recommendation to Arts Research Limited: create a searchable database of action research projects in the arts, so that we continue to learn from each other.