The Practitioner Research Process

Carrying out practitioner research is a process which takes you through a number of stages, as illustrated in Figure 1. This document provides a brief summary of what each of these stages involves, starting with identifying a need. Throughout the entire practitioner research cycle you must ensure that your research conforms to BERA’s ethical guidelines for educational research (www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/08/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf).

![Vital Practitioner Research Cycle](image)

**Need**

Practitioner research is focused on having a positive impact on practice within your setting, starting with some identified need (the problem). Practitioner research is only appropriate for addressing certain sorts of problems. Suitable problems will:

- relate to practice in your setting
- be ones where you cannot ‘prove’ or ‘look up the answers’ because they are dependent upon your particular context, the solution is not obvious or there may be more than one possible solution
- be within your power to do something about (given any constraints that you have to work within such as timescale, resources, expertise, position within the organisation, etc.).

Your starting point must be to outline the problem, ideally by writing a short summary of your perception of what the problem is and what you would like to achieve (i.e. How would you know if you had succeeded in solving the problem?). Having identified your need (the problem) the next stage is to Find out as much as you can about possible solutions to it.

**Find out**

At the Find out stage in the Practitioner Research Cycle you are interested in answering the question ‘How could I most effectively overcome <the problem>?’ In order to do this you need to understand as much as possible about the problem and how other people have solved similar problems. In effect you are trying to find answers to the questions:

1. What do I know about this problem?
2. What do other people know that is relevant to this problem?
3. How have other people overcome similar problems?

Answers to questions 1 and 2 should help you understand the problem more fully. So that you are better able to develop potentially effective solutions to the problem. Answers to question 3 should provide you with a range of possible ideas for approaches you might adapt to help overcome the problem in your context.

There is no single right way to go about finding answers to these questions, but it is easy to become distracted and waste a lot of time if you leap straight into searching for information on the web. Start by imagining possible solutions to the problem, and note them down.

Talk with colleagues about the problem – perhaps using an online community.

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Extend your list of possible solutions to the problem.

Look through your summary of the desired outcome and your list of possible solutions to see if there are key words that recur or capture the essence of the problem and possible solutions. Note them down.

Now search on the internet, using the key words that you have identified. Skim through the results of your search, remembering to go beyond the first page of results. If your searching is not turning up useful material then refine your keywords and try again.

If there are any relevant items then follow those links and read the abstract or skim the item very quickly to decide if it helps answer questions 2 or 3 above. Keep a note of the URLs of relevant material that you find, ideally with a very brief summary of what each item says that is relevant to your problem/solution. Don’t spend too much time reading in detail at this stage and remember to stay focused on answering questions 2 and 3 above. Don’t let yourself get side-tracked.

If you find relevant research reports then they should provide pointers to other relevant sources of information which may speed up your search – or they may indicate that there is not much known about this problem so that further searching is futile.

You should end up with a list of relevant material with very brief notes about how they help answer questions 2 and 3. Bearing in mind how much time you have available, narrow down the list to the most promising looking items. Then read through those in more detail.

The outcomes from the Find out stage of the Practitioner Research Cycle should be a deeper understanding of the problem (you might want to update your summary of it) and a list of possible solutions. Both of these will inform what you decide to do in the Plan stage of the cycle.

**Plan**

The Plan stage breaks down into a number of sub-stages:

- Formulating your research question
- Getting permissions
- Preparing your data collection
- Developing your action plan.

**Formulating your research question**

Practitioner research questions are often framed around possible solutions to your problem:

'What impact would <implementing this solution> have on <the problem>?'

Good research questions will make clear what you are going to do, both in terms of any intervention you are going to make and what data you will need to collect in order to answer the question. They should be as specific as possible. You may find that you cannot move straight to framing your research question, because you need more information before deciding upon the solution you are going to implement.

For example, if your proposed solution involved pupils using their own mobile devices in the class you might need to carry out a feasibility study, to find out what proportion of the pupils would be willing and able to use their own device, before you could implement your solution and evaluate its impact. In some circumstances the feasibility study could be viewed as a practitioner research project in its own right (with its outcomes being shared as in Figure 2).
Getting permissions

Make sure that you abide by BERA’s ethical guidelines for educational research (www.bera.ac.uk/files/2011/08/BERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011.pdf) – read pp.5-10 and make sure you adhere to them.

You must obtain all necessary permissions in writing BEFORE you start your data collection. If you are working in a school or college then you must have permission to carry out the research from the Head/Principle (or their delegate). You should check with them that the data you are collecting and the ways in which you are going to use it comply with your organisation’s data protection registration and all relevant data protection legislation. You must also obtain voluntary informed consent from all the proposed participants in your research. Where minors are involved you need both their informed consent and that of their parents.

Preparing your data collection

A huge amount has been written about data collection and analysis (often under the label of research methods). All this document aims to do is highlight a number of key considerations when thinking about what data to collect and how to collect them:

- Is it necessary? There is a real temptation to collect lots of ‘relevant’ data (in case they are useful), however, for both legal and practical reasons you should only collect data that will help you answer your research question – if it doesn’t help you to answer your research question then don’t collect it.
- Is it sufficient? Aim to collect data from a range of different sources or using different techniques so that you can see if all of the data lead to the same conclusions (this is called triangulation).
- Is it practical to collect? Where possible use data that you would be collecting anyway (e.g. pupil’s work). Try to minimise the disruption that your data collection causes yourself and other people.
- Is it practical to analyse? When preparing to collect data always start by thinking about how you are going to analyse the data in order to answer your research question. If you are not going to be able to analyse the data then don’t collect it.

Developing your action plan

Your action plan needs to include details of what you are going to do and when you are going to do it, covering all aspects of:

- Getting permissions
- Implementing your proposed solution
- Collecting your data
• Analysing your data and drawing conclusions

Sharing your findings

Do

Work through your action plan.

Inevitably things will not go as you expected, so adjust and update your action plan as and when you need to. It is sensible to start to analyse your data as you go along (see Reflect), this may lead to you moving iteratively between the Plan – Do – Reflect stages of the cycle.

Reflect

This is where you analyse your data in order to answer your research question, and think about ‘lessons learnt’.

How you analyse your data will depend upon what your research question is and the nature and format of the data you collect. Analysing the data is about challenging them to find out what they can tell you about the answer(s) to your research question. This almost inevitably involves you in looking for patterns, making judgements and drawing inferences. In order to ensure that your analysis is robust and credible you need to:

• Make it clear how you analysed the data (be transparent) – so that you (or other people) could replicate the analysis.

• Consider different interpretations – if someone else were looking at the data might they draw different conclusions? If so note down the other possible interpretations and make clear what evidence you have that your interpretation is more appropriate.

• Check that all of your data support the same interpretation – if not then that interpretation is likely to need rethinking.

Share

This is a critical part of the practitioner research process for two reasons:

• It opens up your work to critical appraisal. Just knowing that this is going to happen will help to ensure that you carry out your research in an ethical manner and that your methods and interpretations are robust.

• It allows other people to learn from your experience, thus enhancing the community’s expertise.

The key things to consider in this stage of the practitioner research cycle relate to how best to communicate your research:

• Who is your intended audience? You need to match the way you share your outcomes to the needs, interests and expertise of your audience.

• What are the key messages that you want to convey (to that audience)? Remember that you need to provide enough contextual information for people to understand your research and how it relates to their settings.

• What is the most efficient way to communicate those messages clearly and convincingly (to that audience)? Don’t assume that practitioner research has to be ‘written up’ as a formal report or case study. A presentation may be more appropriate and effective for communicating with your key audiences. No matter who you are communicating your research to they will appreciate you doing so as concisely as possible!