

action research

A valuable framework for developing staff training and solving administrative problems

by Sharon Thompson Hirschy

Amy Andrews put her head in her hands. Another training gone awry! She had planned what she felt was an important presentation for her staff on room arrangements. But as some of them left, she heard their whispers: "I don't see how this applies to my classroom!" and "She just doesn't understand what we really need!" The days after the training had not revealed any meaningful changes in the classrooms. Her efforts to train her staff always fell short and she was getting discouraged about ever motivating them to make the changes she felt were necessary to run a high-quality program.

Offering training to promote positive change seems easy, but getting teachers to implement real change in their classrooms is not. Many administrators are using action research — which many teachers use to improve teaching — to address training issues and to facilitate problem solving.



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A personal experience with action research

Many of our lab school staff had expressed fears and concerns regarding the use of technology in their classrooms. As the designated 'computer geek' in our Child Development Department, I was asked to provide training. I wondered how I could make it interesting, relevant to each teacher, and be something that would meet everyone's needs. Geoffrey Mills' book on action research (2000) reminded me of my recent experience of using action research in my first grade classroom to enhance the children's writing. Using a series of simple steps, I developed training for the staff that succeeded in increasing teachers' comfort level and use of technology!

What is action research?

- A planned, systematic investigation into a question or a problem
- May involve observation and assessment of young children; activities teachers regularly do in their course of their jobs
- Conducted by teachers or administrators for their own use
- Yields information that can be used by administrators and teachers to improve professional practice

- "A fancy term for using the process of problem finding and problem solving in our work," according to Diane Levin (2006, p. 39)

Benefits of action research for administrators

How many times have you heard your staff say that the training they receive never applies to them? Their comments include: "I have heard this before," "That wouldn't work," and "This doesn't apply to me." Action research helps you identify the needs of your staff, what they want, and to create training that will not only interest, but be applicable, to each individual. In making them part of your Action Research team, you involve them in the development of their own training, a process of creating solutions to problems they are experiencing.

The basic steps of action research

Step One: Identify a problem or question to investigate

In our center, many teachers had expressed their fear of using technology in their classrooms. I wasn't sure if the

major concern was the different devices, such as cameras or computers with which they were uncomfortable, the software, or concerns about how to effectively use these devices in the classroom. So my research question was: *What makes using technology in the classroom difficult and how can we make it easier?*

Step Two: Collect information (data)

I decided on the following methods as the best for gathering the data I needed to answer my research question:

- Formal and informal observations and conversations with teachers
- Evaluating the classroom equipment to see if part of the problem resided there
- Administering an anonymous survey to teachers to learn their perceptions of their needs and their knowledge and comfort level with different types of technology

Step Three: Analyze and interpret your findings

My observations of the teachers revealed the following information:

- Technology was rarely used in the classroom with the children or by teachers for lesson planning or assessment
- The hardware and software in the classroom needed to be upgraded
- Teachers described several concerns regarding technology: The teachers did not know how to use basic software to manage their classroom records, or to create portfolios and wanted to learn more about using digital cameras.

Step Four: Implement an action plan

Data gathered through the observations, conversations with teachers, and the teacher surveys were shared with the director and assistant director. A written

action plan was developed to address the discrepancies between the current reality and the ideal condition. The plan included:

- A timeline for the proposed changes
- A shopping list that included new digital cameras, computers, and software for the classrooms
- A hands-on workshop on implementing technology in classrooms with young children led teachers through demonstrations and practice with several software programs and applications in the early childhood classroom. With increased confidence in their abilities, the teachers began implementing these new practices in their classrooms.

Step Five: Evaluate and follow up

A formal evaluation of the change process validates the teachers' experiences. In this case:

- Teachers' evaluations of the training were very positive, with the teachers indicating that the information was very helpful!
 - One teacher who had admitted to being scared of technology before the training, said afterward that she felt *even she* could do some of the things they had practiced in the training. In fact, now she is using technology on a regular basis in her classroom.
 - Another teacher who was already using technology said that the training gave her new ideas and activities to try in her classroom!
- Follow-up visits to the teachers after classroom implementation began allowed me to respond to their ongoing concerns, conduct trouble-shooting, and encourage their continued efforts in this area.
 - One teacher had not implemented any of the training because she was unsure how to hook up some of the peripherals to the computer. After working one-on-one with me she

became more comfortable with the equipment and its capabilities.

- Another teacher became frustrated when she couldn't get a piece of software to work the way I had demonstrated in the training. I showed her again and then practiced with her several times to be sure she understood the process. Now the director asks her for help!
- My follow-up revealed additional training needs so more workshops were developed to increase teachers' skill in using digital cameras and other technology. Training included time to practice with the new cameras, downloading pictures, and a discussion of the ways the pictures could be used in the curriculum:
 - Parents received pictures of their children in newsletters and in notes home. They were excited to see their children doing their 'work'! The photos helped teachers explain how the children learned through play. This year's holiday gifts to families included magnets and framed photos made with children's photos. The children were able to share their performance on "International Day" with their families through photos taken during the event. These and other activities greatly enhanced family-school communication.
 - Teachers began to use software and technology for assessment and classroom management. Photos were used to create portfolios showing changes in children's development and their new abilities, such as walking or making a block tower. Technology has also enhanced the experience of our lab students who are being introduced to the computer software by the teachers.
 - The teachers have been creating class books for use in the classroom. Field trips and special activities are recorded in pictures. The teachers download the pictures to the computer, and create class books using PowerPoint® and other

software. They can create several pages, each with a picture and a caption the teacher writes from the children's words. These books have become favorites in the classroom and are kept in the reading center. Mini-books can also be sent home by using the PowerPoint® 'handout' feature or by shrinking the size of each page! While they sometimes print in color, the books are often done in black and white.

According to Barbara Batista, assistant director of the lab school:

The training helped our teachers meet NAEYC accreditation guidelines. I was impressed at how well the teachers responded to the use of digital cameras. They were able to use the cameras to record art projects, activities, and development for each child's portfolio . . . to take pictures to document the use of literacy in the classroom. The training also provided our program with the ability to share information with other agencies.

As we watched the teachers' progress, we observed not only the teachers using technology, but encouraging the children to use it as well! Recently, our lab school directors purchased an online assessment program and the teachers' skill in using technology made this process easier.

Using action research to solve administrative problems

A great deal has been written about the use of action research in the classroom, but administrators can also use it effectively to develop training, to implement changes in the program, to improve guidance strategies, and, in many other ways, to solve problems. Teachers who express concerns with children's challenging behavior or the complexity of working effectively with parents can be involved in a systematic study of the problem as this action research process has demonstrated:

- Survey teachers about their most pressing concerns
- Consider asking parents about their challenges and concerns
- Observe in classrooms to determine the role that teacher behaviors and the environment play in children's behavior
- Invite an objective observer to visit your classrooms and offer suggestions for improvement.

Action research works! It can provide the focus for staff training that you have been looking for and facilitate the programmatic changes your staff can make together. Gaining staff's investment in training and to an ongoing process of program improvement can actually make a director's job easier!

References

- Levin, D. (2006). Action research: What is it? Why is it important? *Exchange*, 170, 38-40.
- Mills, G. (2000). *Action research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.