Second Edition

The Action Research Dissertation

A Guide for Students and Faculty

Kathryn Herr
Gary L. Anderson

The Action Research Dissertation

2nd Edition

The Action Research Dissertation

A Guide for Students and Faculty

2nd Edition

Kathryn Herr
Montclair State University

Gary L. Anderson
New York University

SAGE

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Herr, Kathryn.

The action research dissertation : a guide for students and faculty / Kathryn Herr, Montclair State University, Gary L. Anderson, New York University.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4833-3310-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Social sciences—Research. 2. Action research. 3. Dissertations, Academic—Authorship. 4. Academic writing. I. Anderson, Gary L., 1948– II. Title.

H62.H447 2014
300.72—dc23 2014002908

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

14 15 16 17 18 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

FOR INFORMATION:

SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Acquisitions Editor: Helen Salmon
Digital Content Editor: Katie Guarino
Editorial Assistant: Anna Villarruel
Production Editor: Jane Haenel
Copy Editor: Matthew Sullivan
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Rae-Ann Goodwin
Indexer: Terri Corry
Cover Designer: Michael Dubowe
Marketing Manager: Nicole Elliott

Contents

Foreword

Exposure to a professor considered out of touch with the complex realities in the field has led many a university student to doubt the value of a university-based education. Questions about the relevance of universities to the communities they supposedly serve fuel both formal scholarship (e.g., see Boyer, 1996; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Levin & Greenwood, 2001; National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2001) and informal late-night dorm-room conversations. Yet, doctoral students return to the university for more. Often professionals in their own right, doctoral students come back to the university setting for a range of reasons. They may seek new knowledge, deeper understanding of complex information and issues, the challenges and rewards of shared intellectual work, updated or refined skills, fresh insights, renewed relationships and personal connections, new strategies to face old problems, alliances and relationships with other people concerned about similar issues, the hope that they can contribute to their field and make a difference in the world, and, yes, even the attainment of the credentialing that universities control.

Whatever the mix of motivations, for doctoral students, the journey through the required research component of doctoral education is particularly challenging, pushing them intellectually, philosophically, emotionally, and even financially. Doctoral students may juggle fears of their own adequacies, "Am I up to this?" with fears about the relevance of the academy, "What's the university up to?" Perhaps less talked about inside the world of doctoral studies, some university faculty members likewise struggle with fears, wanting to be good dissertation advisors and committee members, as well as people who make a difference in the world through their university work. For faculty and doctoral students alike, with personal and institutional questioning comes deep scrutiny of the particular knowledge-creation process that universities control and reproduce. None of this is easy sailing. So, while the graduate research process includes thrills and accomplishments, it may also include intense questioning and near paralyzing tough spots along the way. The tough spots are almost impossible to navigate without seasoned guides and a supportive learning community. Layer on top of that the additional challenges of attempting an action research dissertation, when action research arises out of critique of the very assumptions, values, and approaches that ground traditional social science, university-based research. An action research dissertation demands innovative approaches to every aspect of the dissertation process. Indeed, it demands risk taking by both doctoral candidate and faculty. As Levin and Greenwood (2001) have noted, "Universities . . . have created a variety of conditions inimical to the practice of action research" (p. 103). Attempting an action research dissertation can be rough sailing in largely uncharted waters.

In a nanosecond, I can bring up memories of one of my own dissertation rough spots, even though the particular incident happened 20 years ago. Before the convenience of e-mail exchange, I traveled from Gallup, New Mexico, back to Amherst, Massachusetts, to review my "best draft" dissertation proposal with my doctoral committee. My committee was composed of two male professors from my home department, the Center for International Education, and an outside member, a feminist anthropology professor involved in international development research related to gender and political economy. I had taken an alternative

research methods course from one committee member, David Kinsey, in which he introduced us to a range of action research approaches. So I knew he would be supportive of an action research dissertation. Having never gotten my hands on an actual action research dissertation proposal, I had agonized over the many contradictions of individually writing a proposal for a participatory action research (PAR) process. Nonetheless, with a best draft dissertation proposal in hand, I faced my committee. I had counted the feminist anthropologist as an action research ally, although why I'm not sure. So I was blindsided when she tore my proposal to shreds. Throwing the proposal on the table for added effect, she dismissed months of work with the declaration, "If you want to do research, do research; if you want to organize, then go do activist work." How could I have been so stupid, her words implied, as to think that I could combine action and research in the dissertation process?

Maintaining what dignity I could, I left the meeting and sequestered myself in a stall in the women's bathroom on the third floor of Hills House South and sobbed and fumed in private. Indeed, how could I have been so stupid? How in the world could I write a proposal for an action research dissertation and then get it through the university system, with first my committee and then the institutional review board looming in the background? Where and how could I gather more allies and find guidelines for doing an action research dissertation, starting with the proposal? What were the challenges and contradictions that I would have to sort through as I struggled to work with others to generate usable knowledge through a collaborative process that just might contribute to social justice or change? And how to answer that nagging internal voice that floated the question, "Is any of this even possible in the academy?"

Twenty years later, it's a joy to read Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson's book designed to help doctoral student researchers tackle these issues head on. No more being forced to comb through appendices, prefaces, endnotes, and other notes at the margins to figure out how to tackle an action research dissertation. Drawing from years of collaboration with their own graduate students and other school-based action researchers, Kathryn and Gary lay out the issues and decisions that doctoral students and their committees have to negotiate as they engage in an action research dissertation.

This volume comes out of the work that Gary and Kathryn have done for years to pry open spaces in universities for action research, to question the status quo of doctoral research, and to proactively support a potentially transformative alternative. The authors have been doing what they support doctoral students doing, that is, changing their own work environment through studying their practices as doctoral committee members, university faculty, and school-based action researchers.

In this volume, doctoral researchers are asked to sort through their own multiple positions and identities, and those of collaborators. The difficult but necessary choice points of potentially transformative knowledge creation are mapped out and named for what they are: political decisions with power dimensions that the doctoral researcher must work through and publicly articulate. Clearly, knowledge production is not a value-free or neutral endeavor. Doctoral students have to figure out which action research traditions best mesh with their own beliefs, values, commitments to social change, and organizational workplace. These are not neat, individualized academic exercises with correct answers, but messy work best done in collaboration, reflection, and conversation. New insights and knowledge are arrived at through action and research done in relationship

with others.

This volume is a long-awaited and desperately needed contribution to the action research–university partnership. It's valuable for doctoral students hoping to collaborate with faculty members, other doctoral students, and community- or school-based partners on a different way of doing doctoral research and a socially engaged way of being a researcher. It's also valuable for dissertation committee members, whether experienced or novice at supporting doctoral students engaging in action research dissertations.

In many ways, the volume may be threatening to those who have resisted any alternative to traditional positivist dissertations or have somehow sidestepped discussion about the supposed objective knowledge creation process reproduced in universities. This volume gets to the heart of action research, foregrounding power relations and what those relations mean for all aspects of knowledge production. Gary and Kathryn's volume will also serve to amplify conversations about the relevancy of universities and the dissertation process and products to the pressing social and justice issues of the 21st century. It puts a wedge further in that crack in the positivist door, holding open the space for continued scrutiny of the purposes, processes, and products of research.

—Patricia Maguire
Gallup, New Mexico

REFERENCES

Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences,49*(7), 18–33.

Giroux, H., & Myrsiades, K. (Eds.). (2001). *Beyond the corporate university.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Levin, M., & Greenwood, D. (2001). Pragmatic action research and the struggle to transform universities into learning communities. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 103–113). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges. (2001). *Returning to our roots: Executive summaries of the reports of the Kellogg Commission on the future of state and land-grant universities*. Washington, DC: Author.

Preface

Like many university professors before us, we wrote this book because we couldn't find one that addressed our instructional needs. We found that many graduate students were struggling with turning action research projects into master's theses or doctoral dissertations, and had little guidance in this effort. Some were not even our students but were struggling with dissertation committees that simply were not trained to understand the complexities of this type of research. Both of us have chaired action research dissertations, and coauthor Herr has engaged extensively in action research herself with middle and high school students and faculty (Herr, 1995, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d). Most applied fields and professional schools in universities offer PhDs as well as more explicitly applied doctorate and master's degrees. Nevertheless, most fields have not thought through the issues of organizational or community insiders doing research in their own settings or outsiders doing research that views insiders as full participants rather than as research subjects or informants.

Traditional positivist or naturalist paradigms do not capture the unique dilemmas faced by action researchers. Many excellent books exist that are guides to action research in general. In fact, we published one ourselves that is in its second edition (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). These books, however, fail to address the specific issues that arise in turning an action research project into a dissertation. For instance, a major goal—among others—of action research is to generate local knowledge that is fed back into the setting. However, dissertations demand public knowledge that is transferable to other settings and written up in such a way that others can see its application to their settings.

While we will focus on how action research requires a somewhat unique approach to writing the dissertation, we will not provide an introduction to action research itself because many excellent introductions exist from various perspectives. An excellent overview is Greenwood and Levin (2006). Some introductory books provide step-by-step approaches, while others provide a more descriptive approach, drawing on examples. Introductions have appeared in various disciplines such as public health and health care (Koch & Kralik, 2006; Koshy, Koshy, & Waterman, 2011; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Stringer & Genat, 2004), social work (Fuller & Petch, 1995), organizational studies (McNiff & Whitehead, 2000), education (Anderson et al., 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009; Mills, 2002), community development (Jason, Keys, Balcazar, Taylor, Davis, & Durlak, 2003), and counseling (McLeod, 1999).

Action research is often collaborative, whereas the culture of dissertations demands individual demonstration of competence. Because of its emergent design and cyclical revision of research questions, an action research dissertation requires unique decisions about how to write a proposal, how to structure the dissertation itself, how to narrate the "findings," and how to defend the final product. In fact, it is often difficult to think of action research as a linear product with a finite ending, as successful projects can spiral on for years. For many students, the biggest problem is either locating dissertation committee members who understand this type of research or legitimating it to committee members who may be open-minded but unfamiliar with the methodology. In this sense, the book is written for both doctoral students and their

dissertation committees.

We also hope to provide a book that brings the interests of distinct action research communities together. In spite of claims to being interdisciplinary, action researchers tend to work within their own disciplinary boundaries. Pick up a book or an article by an action researcher in education, and there are few citations outside the field. The same is true for those who use action research for organizational development, international development, social work, or health fields. Coauthor Herr has a master's and a PhD in social work but has done most of her action research in schools; coauthor Anderson is an educator and has written primarily about education. Therefore, while our expertise is primarily in education action research, we have worked hard to be as inclusive of other fields as possible.

Most doctoral students are formally trained in quantitative and qualitative research methods, and seldom encounter an action research course. Increasingly, action research courses are appearing in graduate programs, and it is receiving its own chapter in some introductory research texts (see Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Because most doctoral students have some notion of what a traditional dissertation looks like, we do not attempt to reproduce the kind of step-by-step guide provided by how-to books on dissertations. We do not oppose such books—although some are of the "dissertation writing for dummies" variety, many are excellent, and we suggest students read these manuals alongside this book (see Biklen & Casella, 2007; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Hepner & Hepner, 2003; Meloy, 2001; Piantanida & Garman, 1999). In this book, we are more interested in helping students understand the ways action research dissertations are different from more traditional dissertations and to prepare students and their committees for the unique dilemmas that action research raises around validity, positionality, design, write-up, ethics, and defense of the dissertation.

We believe that the best way to prepare to write an action research dissertation is to read action research dissertations. It is remarkable that doctoral students are seldom assigned dissertations to read in doctoral seminars. For this reason, we often refer readers to dissertations that might serve as exemplars. To avoid an excessively didactic approach, we also try to provide brief examples from action research dissertations of how various students have dealt with issues of epistemology, methodology, ethics, validity, narration, and so on. Because action research dissertations do not follow a step-by-step chronological order, we have not taken this linear approach. We believe that as students understand the unique dilemmas of writing up an action research dissertation, they can employ the very cycles of plan-act-observe-reflect to their own emerging document.

Although the book represents mostly original work, we have incorporated and updated some previous work. Sections of Chapter 2 on the history of action research are updated from Chapter 2 of Anderson et al. (2007). Some of the work on positionality in Chapter 3 is updated from Anderson and Jones (2000). The section on validity criteria in Chapter 4 is updated from Anderson and Herr (1999).

The order of chapters is somewhat arbitrary; they can be read in any order. We see the book as a resource book, and certain chapters may become more relevant at different stages in the dissertation process. Graduate students who want a neat, step-by-step approach to research should not choose action research for a dissertation. For instance, a traditional five-chapter dissertation using inferential statistics to analyze survey data or secondary data sets is less labor intensive and can be done without leaving one's office. Unlike traditional dissertations that insist on a dispassionate, distanced attitude toward one's research, action research

is often chosen by doctoral students because they are passionate about their topic, setting, and co-participants. We have attempted to capture this passionate tone, while providing a balanced and useful guide to carving a dissertation out of the exciting but always messy process of action research.

Acknowledgments

This book is part of a larger conversation we've been having for years with friends, students, and colleagues, some only known to us through their writings. Others allowed us to pick their brains, and offered suggestions, contacts, or access to their own work; we thank Pat Maguire and James Kelly for their particular generosity in this regard. Our biggest debt is to doctoral students we have known and worked with over the years. In allowing us to think with them about their dissertation research, they have pushed our thinking and understanding of action research. For this, we are grateful. We hope this book will be of use to those doctoral students yet to come.

We gratefully acknowledge feedback from the following SAGE reviewers:

- Janel M. Kerr, University of Idaho
- Hsiu-Lien Lu, Georgia Southern University
- Molly Yunfang Zhou, Paine College

About the Authors

Kathryn Herr is a professor in the College of Education and Human Services at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. She is coauthor of the book *Studying Your Own School: An Educator's Guide to Qualitative Practitioner Research* (second edition, 2007). Her professional background is in social work and education.

Gary L. Anderson is a professor in the Department of Administration, Leadership, and Technology in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University. He is a former teacher and high school principal. He has written numerous articles on action research with coauthor Kathryn Herr, as well as articles and books on educational policy and leadership. He is the author of *Advocacy Leadership: Toward a Post-Reform Agenda* (2009).

1
Introduction

What Is an Action Research Dissertation?

Dissertations in the social sciences are not what they used to be. Before the advent of more qualitative and action-oriented research, advice on how to do the standard five-chapter dissertation was fairly clear. Students were advised to begin in linear fashion, producing the first three chapters for the proposal defense and then adding a chapter to report findings and another for implications and recommendations after the data were gathered and analyzed. The qualitative dissertation, with its more emergent design and narrative style, challenged the notion that three completed chapters could be defended as a proposal or that five chapters were enough to effectively "display" qualitative data. Over the past 30 years, dissertation committees and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) have become more tolerant of the unique needs of qualitative researchers.

The action research dissertation is the new kid on the block, and it is coming under intense scrutiny by both dissertation committees and IRBs. While action research shares some similarities with qualitative research (and even quantitative research), it is different in that research participants themselves either are in control of the research or are participants in the design and methodology of the research. In fact, many action researchers argue that action research—and participatory action research, in particular—is less a methodology than an orientation or stance toward the research process and the participants (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Committee members and IRBs are often stymied by the cyclical nature of action research as well as its purposes, which transcend mere knowledge generation to include personal and professional growth, and organizational and community empowerment. IRBs are confused about risk factors in settings in which research subjects are participants in the research at the same time that they are, often, subordinates within the organizational settings. These power relations are further complicated when the action researcher is also an insider to the organization. Furthermore, action research often uses a narrative style that allows the researcher to reflect on the research process as well as the findings, which seldom can be easily formulated as propositional knowledge. Finally, action research has grown out of very different research traditions and has manifested itself differently in different disciplines and fields of study. In fact, action research is inherently interdisciplinary and seldom fits neatly into the norms of a particular discipline or field.

Historically, action researchers were academics or professional researchers who involved research participants in their studies to a greater extent than was typical with traditional research. In fact, some social scientists argue that participatory forms of action research are merely variants of applied research and that its difference consists merely of the degree to which participants are included (Spjelkavik, 1999). In some cases, participants are involved from the inception of the research to the writing and presentation of the final report. Increasing numbers of doctoral students in fields such as community psychology, social work, nursing, and

international development want to do dissertation studies in which their outsider status is tempered by collaboration with insiders, and in which action is central to the research. Many action research dissertations that we will discuss in this book are of this type. However, as more working professionals have begun receiving doctoral degrees, there has been a tendency for action researchers to be insiders to their professional settings, making them at once both researcher and practitioner. This is particularly true of EdD (doctorate in education) programs, which have produced a significant number of dissertation studies in recent years done by organizational insiders. These practitioner researchers often want to study their own contexts because they want the research to make a difference in their own setting and sometimes, often mistakenly, because they think it will be more convenient and easier to do the study where they work.

THE MANY FACES OF ACTION RESEARCH

So what is action research? Perhaps its most important feature is that it shifts its locus of control in varying degrees from professional or academic researchers to those who have been traditionally called the subjects of research. There are several terms in current use that describe research done either by or in collaboration with practitioners or community members. The most common ones are *action research*; *participatory action research (PAR)*; *practitioner research*; *YPAR*; *action science*; *collaborative action research*; *cooperative inquiry*; *educative research*; *appreciative inquiry*; *self-study*; *emancipatory praxis*; *community-based participatory research*; *teacher research*; *participatory rural appraisal*; *feminist action research*; *feminist, antiracist participatory action research*; and *advocacy activist, or militant research.* As we will make clear in Chapter 2, each of these terms connotes different purposes, positionalities, epistemologies, ideological commitments, and, in many cases, different research traditions that grew out of very different social contexts.

We have chosen to use the term *action research* for this book for pragmatic and philosophical reasons. Pragmatically, it is probably the most generically used term in all disciplines and fields of study, so it serves as an umbrella term for the others. It also makes *action* central to the research enterprise and sets up nicely a tension with traditional research, which tends to take a more distanced approach to research settings. Much like those who study natural experiments, action researchers tend to study ongoing actions that are taken in a setting. Such action-oriented research would raise issues of reactivity for traditional researchers, both qualitative and quantitative. Traditional researchers see their impact on the setting either as positive (as using carefully planned and controlled treatments in an experimental design) or as negative (as contaminating or distorting ongoing events in a natural setting).

In some fields, such as education, nursing, and social work, the term *practitioner research* (or, more specifically, *teacher research*, *administrator research*, etc.) has gained popularity (particularly in the U.S.). This term implies that insiders to the setting are the researchers, whereas in other traditions of action research, the researcher is an outsider who collaborates to varying degrees with insider practitioners or community members. The term *action research* leaves the positionality (insider or outsider) of the researcher open. The term *practitioner researcher* places the insider/practitioner at the center of the research, but often tends to decenter other important stakeholders, such as clients and other community members. Because of this, many argue that action research should always be collaborative regardless of whether the researcher is an outsider or insider to the setting under study. We will return repeatedly to this issue of positionality throughout the book,

because how action researchers position themselves vis-à-vis the setting under study will determine how one thinks about power relations, research ethics, and the validity or trustworthiness of the study's findings.

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF ACTION RESEARCH

Although the plethora of terms coined to describe this research reflects wide disagreement on many key issues, most agree on the following: 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, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. What constitutes evidence or, in more traditional terms, data is still being debated. Action research is oriented to some action or cycle of actions that organizational or community members have taken, are taking, or wish to take to address a particular problematic situation. The idea is that changes occur within the setting or within the participants and researchers themselves.

Action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation. Collaboration for insiders involves seeking outsiders with relevant skills or resources (e.g., dissertation committees, methodology consultants), though most agree that the perceived need for change should come from within the setting. Even in a case in which a lone practitioner is studying his or her own practice, participation or at least ongoing feedback should be sought from other stakeholders in the setting or community to ensure a democratic outcome and provide an alternative source of explanations. The issue of collaboration and participation creates important tensions in the case of action research dissertations, because the culture of dissertations has traditionally discouraged collaborative work.

Like all forms of inquiry, action research is *value laden.* Although most practitioners or communities hope that action research will solve pressing problems or improve their practice, what constitutes improvement or a solution is not self-evident. It is particularly problematic in fields that do not have consensus on basic aims. Action research takes place in settings that reflect a society characterized by conflicting values and an unequal distribution of resources and power. Here, the notion of reflexivity is crucial because action researchers must interrogate received notions of improvement or solutions in terms of who ultimately benefits from the actions undertaken.

Several more concise definitions exist in the body of literature on action research that has grown over the years. For example, McKernan (1988) described it as "a form of self-reflective problem solving, which enables practitioners to better understand and solve pressing problems in social settings" (p. 6). McCutcheon and Jung (1990) agree but add an emphasis on collaboration:

> [Action research is] systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy of practice in order to improve practice. (p. 148)

Kemmis and McTaggart (1987), writing about education, add the goal of social justice to their definition of action research as

> a form of *collective,* self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are

carried out. Groups of participants can be teachers, students, principals, parents, and other community members—any group with a shared concern. The approach is only Action Research when it is *collaborative,* though it is important to realize that the Action Research of the group is achieved through the *critically examined action* of the individual group members. (p. 6)

Argyris and Schon (1991), who focus on organizational and professional development, describe the goals and methods of the action research tradition.

Action Research takes its cues—its questions, puzzles, and problems—from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts. It bounds episodes of research according to the boundaries of the local context. It builds descriptions and theories within the practice context itself, and tests them there through *intervention experiments*—that is, through experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desired change in the situation. (p. 86)

The double burden that the authors refer to is the concern with both action (improvement of practice, social change, and the like) and research (creating valid knowledge about social practice), and, according to the authors, this sets up a conflict between the rigor and the relevance of the research—a conflict that has been viewed as both an advantage and disadvantage by different commentators. Unlike much traditional social science research that frowns on intervening in any way in the research setting, action research demands some form of intervention. For the action researcher, these interventions constitute a spiral of action cycles in which one undertakes

1. to develop a *plan* of action to improve what is already happening;
2. to *act* to implement the plan;
3. to *observe* the effects of action in the context in which it occurs; and
4. to *reflect* on these effects as a basis for further planning, subsequent action and on, through a succession of cycles. (Kemmis, 1982, p. 7)

This cycle of activities forms an action research spiral in which each cycle increases the researchers' knowledge of the original question, puzzle, or problem, and, it is hoped, leads to its solution. Sometimes, these action cycles are completed in a matter of minutes since professionals are always planning and rethinking plans on the fly. Other times, action cycles may take days, weeks, or months.

We prefer to remain as eclectic as possible with regard to a definition of action research; however, the definition that a researcher chooses should be made clear in a dissertation. This definition will then determine the kinds of epistemological, ethical, and political decisions a researcher will have to make throughout the dissertation study. Furthermore, we recommend that researchers make this decision-making process explicit in the dissertation itself, either in the body or in an appendix. Until action research is as well understood as traditional methodologies, such discussions may be needed to reassure (and educate) skeptical dissertation committee members.

THE ACTION RESEARCH DISSERTATION

Unfortunately, there is more writing *about* action research than documentation of actual research studies. This is, in part, because those who engage in action research projects are often more interested in generating knowledge that can be fed back into the setting under study than generating knowledge that can be shared beyond the setting. Drawing on Geertz's (1983) work on "local knowledge" in anthropology, Cochran-Smith