

THE RESEARCH CENTRE

CITY COLLEGE NORWICH

**Using Action Research to
Investigate Current
Lecturers' Skills Demand**

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City College Norwich

Action Research Project: Final Report

1. Title: Using action research to investigate current lecturers' skills demand

2. Keywords:

Research based
Staff development
Hotel school

3. Summary

3.1 The issue.

- To encourage staff in the college to identify their own staff development needs and to improve the take up staff development opportunities that are offered at the college.

3.2 The aim.

- To use action research to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke staff development opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.

3.3 The outcomes.

- The re-engagement of staff in the staff development process has aided retention and achievement of learners. This has been evidenced by staff identifying their own staff development needs, which in the majority of cases were to do with teaching and learning.
- Information technology was most often identified as an area requiring updating especially as it relates to use in the classroom. Many of the interventions identified by participants were to use these IT facilities with students, thus engaging the students in the learning process and aiding retention and achievement.
- Encouraged reflective practice.

4. Context

4.1 City College Norwich.

- City College Norwich is a large general community college of further and higher education, based in the city of Norwich, with approximately 20,000 learners (of these 1,400 are on Higher Education courses).
- It employs in the region of 1200 staff.
- It offers a balanced portfolio of academic and vocational provision across a wide range of subject areas. It currently provides programmes in nine out of ten Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) areas of learning and offers a range of qualifications from foundation studies to post graduate qualifications.
- It is an Associate member of Anglia Polytechnic University (APU) who validates degrees offered in the institution.

4.2 Hotel school.

- The Hotel School is one of the largest teaching schools in the college. It is a Centre of Vocational excellence (CoVE) for its work in Catering and Hospitality. This has funded substantial and ongoing up grades to the student learning environment to support on site study and practical operations.
- It is equipped with state of the art interactive information technology equipment.
- It has approximately 1200 learners studying a wide range of programmes, serving the local, national and international markets.
- It employs approximately 30 teaching staff plus a number of support staff.
- It offers a range of full and part time programmes in Hospitality, Catering and Tourism at both FE and HE.

<http://www.ccn.ac.uk/site/dept/hotel.htm>

5. Aims and objectives

5.1 The issues that needed to be addressed.

- Staff were not taking ownership of their own staff development needs and not making the most of the provision on offer. With rapid changes in teaching and learning that are taking place, teaching staff need to be up to date with current practice and thinking. Professional development profiling and timing of staff development are also issues. The current system is seen as being inflexible and there are also issues to do with the tension between corporate and individual staff development needs.

5.2 How the issues emerged.

- The issues were identified by the research co-ordinator and also by the staff development manager, who was concerned by lack of take-up of staff development and a realisation that timing is an issue. A wide range of staff development activities were being offered in the college and advertised through the weekly 'For you information', email and the 'Corporate staff development programme'.

5.3 How the understanding of these issues change over time.

- All the lecturers involved in this research were keen to take up staff development opportunities, but they were restricted in their ability to do this due to commitments, primarily teaching and other duties. Corporate staff development was not always seen as being relevant to individual needs.

5.4 Aims and objectives.

- The project aimed to use action research to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke staff development opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.
- The specific objectives were to create data based staff opportunities that are owned by participants and that address specific needs, and also, to review and evaluate the process and the changes that arose out of the process. Focus groups were used to reflect on staff development needs and to use the action research cycle to encourage reflective practice and to move forward.

6. Strategies

6.1. Stages of development.

6.1.1 Desk research.

Before starting the research process, relevant desk desktop research was carried out on staff development and Action Research. The benefits of desk research are to gain a better understanding of this research method from an educational perspective. The paper by Cunningham and Doncaster (2002) was useful and relevant to the research as it was addressing 'Developing a research culture in the Further education sector: a case study of work-based approach to staff development'. This article identified that:

'a staff development programme leading to real quality improvement within an organisation is seen as very attractive to college managers'.

Their research also evidenced that:

'Staff Development programmes were needed which would encourage staff to take stock, analyse their strengths and weaknesses and become responsible for their own development... The programme involved staff undertaking research into areas of responsibility which would benefit to the college'.

The paper goes on to state that:

'a programme of this (action research) nature makes very heavy demands on staff time.'

They conclude that a staff development programme that is to be valued will be able to deliver results at a personal and an organisational level and is both responsive to the needs of the College and helps to support staff in a cycle of continuous development.

6.1.2 Action Research:

Participation is more to do with action than research. It is empirical and responsive to evidence. The quality of evidence increases with multiple sources of evidence used. You go from 'fuzzy beginnings to appropriate endings' (Dick 2004)

'An approach to research which tends to focus upon the resolution or improvement of practical situations. Issues at work often provide the subject of action-research projects. The purpose is to use the research process as a practical means of intervention.' Oliver (1997.p.184)

According to Dick (2004) action research should be:-

*Cyclic; Participative; Qualitative; Reflective; Responsive (to emergent needs)
Flexible; Emergent; Critical reflection; Participants are co-researchers*

Next research on focus groups and how to take this research forward was carried out.

6.1.3 Focus groups.

This action research project used focus groups of teaching staff from the Hotel school. Nine teaching staff (just over a third of the teaching staff in the school) participated in this research.

This action research was planned to take place in two cycles of three rounds in each cycle to allow for staff to enact the action research cycle and to develop interventions. With reference to Collis and Hussey (2003) focus groups are used as a method of collecting data. Participants discuss their reactions and feelings under the guidance of the group leader. The research documents the feelings and opinions of a group involved in a common situation. A relaxed atmosphere is required; a record of what is said, ensuring that all issues relating to the topic are covered giving boundaries to the study. It is important to listen to other group members and encourage participants.

6.2. Stages of development.

6.2.1. First stage: meeting with key staff development stakeholders.

Discussions with key staff development stakeholders at the college were held to establish what the current staff development plan for the college was, how it was determined, managed and delivered and monitored. The manager responsible for management development and diversity was

interviewed and the issues of keeping up to date with current legislation were discussed. Interviews were also held with the staff development manager about the PDP process for the college (which was taking place during the second action research cycle) and the results of the previous years PDP (appendix 1). This was used in the first workshop as a discussion tool. The PDP addressed the issue of personal, group/team and corporate needs. The Staff Development manager was well aware of the issues of timing of staff development and the requirement for 'points of need' help with staff development in each area of the college; this was especially true for IT. Each area should have had at least one person who was competent and could help others. Timing and scheduling was a big issue ('Finding time for staff development' has been posted on the college Intranet highlighting the fact that full time staff have 5 days college SD and 12 days self directed SD). In her opinion lecturers did not prioritise staff development, it was 'bottom of priorities'.

Staff development should be treated as a luxury and encourage reflective practices and should be scheduled and prioritised; teachers tend to 'be learner focused and teacher last'. So the view of the Staff Development manager was that lectures did not prioritise staff development and that it was seen as a 'chore'.

6.2.3. Second stage: action research process.

The action research was developed in stages to facilitate staff participation.

The main change to the action plan was to use 6 participants in the first focus group (rather than 10). This was to make the target more realistic and manageable, as there were a number of issues relating to recruiting volunteers for this staff development project.

The second round proved even more challenging to recruit participants, three carried through with the process. Three workshops were carried out in each cycle; the outline of these workshops can be seen in appendices 3, 4 and 5. The first workshop involved an explanation of the action research cycle, getting participants engaged in action research and also addressing the issues of the strengths and weaknesses of staff development process at the College. Although only 9 teaching staff participated in this research this represent 30% of the lecturers in the Hotel School.

6.3 Did the strategies evolve over time?

The strategies were developed in the initial proposal, as evidenced by the action plan.

The project ran on time, the first round of action research took place in January and February, as identified in the action plan. The second cycle took place in May. The materials developed for the first round of Action Research were adapted for the second round.

6.4 Who was involved in planning and implementing the strategies?

The initial proposal was made by the research co-ordinator of the college. A team of action researchers was put together focusing on a number of projects. So the planning and implementation stages involved a number of staff at the college as well as the LSDA consultant. Regular meetings were held to review the projects with the research co-ordinator at City College. All participants were thoroughly involved at every stage in identifying their own staff development needs and interventions.

6.5 Which elements of the strategies were most successful?

The lecturers who took part were keen and supportive of the research and enjoyed the process as it allowed a forum for discussion about staff development and facilitated reflective practice.

This was a group of teachers who knew each other well as they work as a team in the hotel school. All 9 participants were well well-qualified teachers with many years experience of teaching between them, who are used to working together. Issues that arose during the workshops were 'saying too much' and 'keeping on track'. As a team we did not have much time to talk about work in our everyday lives. They were supportive of this research and keen to participate.

The project has impacted on the participants' staff development. Each participant identified an intervention in workshop one, acted on it and then reviewed it in workshop two and then identified another intervention to be implemented and reviewed in workshop three. All participants were able to carry out some self-identified staff development during the duration of the action research process.

6.6 Which strategies were least successful?

It proved a hard task to get sufficient numbers of staff together for focus groups. The nature of teaching, and having an 800 hour full-time teaching contract, meant in reality teaching 22 hours plus a week.. This did not facilitate a common time for meetings during academic terms. The first focus group was successful, because it took place during the semester break and involved staff teaching on a similar range of programmes. The second round was less successful and involved seeing staff individually or in pairs to facilitate the action research. Also there were particular issues for staff involved in operations, particularly when it came to timing and issues of covering classes. With reference to the original action plan, telephone interviews were not necessary, as access to participants did not require this.

6.7 Were any aspects of your strategy particularly effective or innovative?

The focus groups encouraged staff to reflect on their teaching practice, which normally there was little time to during the working week to do this. All teaching staff acknowledged that they used the principles of action

research cycle as part of the teaching and learning process, but that there was never enough time to reflect on practice. All participants were able to identify their own staff development.

6.8 Indicate any strategy that has not worked well as anticipated.

Focus groups proved difficult to facilitate due to a lack of common time during the working week for participants to meet.

The researchers own work workload was an issue at the beginning of the research process, but this improved as time went on.

Recruiting participants and finding time due to staff workload has also been an issue and I am very grateful to those who did take part.

6.9 Qualitative issues.

Quotes are included here from participants from the range of action research workshops that were carried out. They reflect the participants' feelings about staff development at the college. They have been divided into comments about the action research process; issues about timing of staff development; technological issues, (particularly IT issues. IT is relevant because of all the technological changes that have taken place in the class classroom recently) and finally general staff development issues. These comments were useful to the research as they gave an indication of the feelings of teaching staff of the Hotel School about the current staff development process and their active involvement in the process.

6.9.1 Action research process comments.

These comments indicated a familiarity with action research by participants as a process, even though most staff had not formally been involved with action research previously.

'Sounds a bit like target setting, I am task orientated and respond to targets'
'So we take a really small target- a small bite?'
'We could apply this to our personal lives'
'It's a bit like weight watchers; you come back and see what you've done'
'Reflecting on teaching and learning is what we are used to as teachers'

6.9.2 Issues of timing of staff development.

Timing of staff development is a real issue. This was also highlighted by the staff development manager who indicated that staff were required to partake in 5 days college development and 12 days self directed development. This research showed that staff were willing to take part in staff development activities, as long as they were relevant to their needs, but have had issues with when they could attend and this varied for each member of staff depending on the nature of their teaching and workload. This was especially true in operational areas as there might be no member of staff who could cover specialised classes.

'It is time consuming to produce a good presentation.'
'...timing during semester delivery and work scheduling to facilitate reflective time for such event'
'Never enough time...some poor delivery...too many people organising stuff ...often corporate objectives'
'No time to attend or timed so I can't attend'
'We can't even fix a meeting, no wonder we can't do staff development!'
'...I couldn't have done it if I wasn't on semester break'
'What is interesting that without the semester break we couldn't have done this.'
'There is a real issue of timing of SD events, especially if you work in operations, as lunch time is the busiest time- so drop in sessions at this time are useless. Late sessions can be difficult especially if you have done two practical sessions back to back, you are "too knackered to attend".'
'Calls on time, higher power demanding tick box staff development'
'No cover for teaching missed (due to staff development activities...)'
'There is no slack in the system to cover classes, in theory classes should be covered, but in practice there is no one to do this. In one case the member of staff is so specialised that the head of school is the only other person qualified to take his class.'

6.9.3 Technological issues (IT or other).

- Information technology (IT) was highlighted particularly as an area of concern by participants. This was either because they did not feel competent and felt threatened by IT or because they were competent, but frustrated by administrative issues such as insufficient space on the college computer system to store electronic materials, or technology not working. It also highlighted the need for experts in each area that could give help and training when needed in IT. This was also a focus as the Hotel School had Information Technology Learning (ITL) equipment in many classrooms. Teachers felt challenged to have to use it.

'It doesn't work for me, it knows I'm there...'(about IT)
'Inspection training is a corporate need, if everything else was right we'd be able to deliver and use technology'
'I'm afraid of the technology...'
'I asked for help, I didn't want all the slides to change colour.'
'I am no longer a technophobe...'
'Even though I can't do it, I can find someone who can. I didn't do what I set out to do, but to my mind we can develop using others.'
'Now that I have produced all these Power Point- presentations I don't have enough space on the computer to store it! Skills are developed and then you can't do it or you are stopped for administrative reasons.'
'We really need a session on what the technology can do- followed up by a hands on session for staff to learn how to use the device, preferably from a colleague who has mastered it first'.

6.9.4 General staff development issues.

A number of other issues were raised during the workshops, more generally to do with staff development. These were to do with corporate needs not being the same as individual needs; funding; opportunities; who determined staff development needs and usefulness of staff development undertaken. This illustrated the complex issues involved.

'Industrial updating is my priority'
'Conferences are really useful'
'Staff development is clouded by historical problems...'
'We think that (SD) is both corporate and personal'
'(staff development) is not considered to be part of normal workload so gets subordinated to teaching and administration'
'Staff development activities need to be planned ahead of scheduling timetables'
'Funds (for staff development) hidden and therefore not exploited'
'Industry do not see enough evidence of staff development (issues of respectability)'
'Not always focussed at my own personal needs'
'Great opportunities for FE, not so good for HE'
'Corporate needs, tick box- not really useful in my everyday life as a teacher'
'I'm afraid to admit in SD sessions that I don't know- I feel like an idiot.'
'How do you know what you don't know. Are you pushed or pulled?'
'Learners' and programme needs dictate my SD needs'
'SD needs to be focussed more at personal needs'
'There is a gap between practice and theory, this is how it works in theory, but it does not relate to practice.'

7. Outcomes

7.1 What impact have your strategies had on learner outcomes?

- The re-engagement of staff in the staff development process has aided retention and achievement of learners. This has been evidenced by staff identifying their own staff development needs, which in the majority of cases were to do with teaching and learning.
- Information technology was most often identified as an area requiring updating especially as it related to use in the classroom. Many of the interventions identified by participants were to use these IT facilities with students, thus engaging the students in the learning process and aiding retention and achievement.
- It encouraged reflective practice.

7.2 Have the strategies had any other outcomes?

- It has increased participants' awareness of action research and an interest in carrying out other research projects.
- The research has highlighted the inflexibility of the current staff development system. Staff development needs to be flexible and responsive to participants' needs.
- Information technology issues have arisen as staff development needs. This was driven by departmental and corporate needs. It also reflected where we are as a college at this current time. The college is investing in information technology, with state of the art ILT equipment being installed in many of the classrooms.

7.3 Monitoring of implementation of strategies.

- The action research process facilitated the monitoring of the process through use of workshops were participants reported on their progress with their 'research'. Each workshop was documented as notes

were taken during the meeting either by a note taker or by the project leader. Participants either emailed or wrote informal notes of their findings or were gently encouraged in informal conversation 'over coffee'.

8. Key learning points

8.1 What key points have emerged from the project?

- Lack of time or perceived lack of appropriate time for staff development was a real issue and this was in agreement with the staff development manager's comment on the college intranet 'finding time for staff development'.
- Action research was an excellent way to engage staff in the process, though it is time consuming in agreement with Cunningham and Doncaster (2002).

8.2 Which have been positive?

- Participants have been engaged in the staff development process.
- The project aim was achieved to investigate current lecturers' skill demand and encouraged lecturers to carry out bespoke staff development based on identified areas of need.
- A limited data database of staff opportunities that are owned by the participants and that address specific needs has been developed. This was dynamic reflecting the rapid changes of working in the Hotel school at City College Norwich.
- Reflective practice has been encouraged.

8.3 Which have been negative?

- Not as many participants were involved as initially identified in the action plan.
- Using the action research process was a time consuming activity, as evidenced by the issues of getting common time for focus groups to meet.

8.4 Would I do the same again?

- Focus groups would not be used, as it has been very difficult to find a common time to meet.
- The result in the form of a data base of bespoke staff activities is very personal to the individual. It is more important to encourage staff to reflect on their own needs using the action research process rather than producing a list of staff development activities for everyone.

8.5 Would I do it differently?

- Interviews and possibly questionnaires would be used to support the action research and also not be so ambitious with the number of participants or to widen the participation to the whole college rather than one school.

8.6 Do's and don'ts

- In order for staff development to be of use it needs to be relevant and specific to staff needs. Timing is also important, what suits one person does not suit another person, so flexibility is the issue.

8.7 Transferability.

- The research that I have carried out confirms the findings of Cunningham and Doncaster(2002) that lecturers need to be engaged with the staff development process and that action research can be used to determine staff development, but that it is a time consuming business.
- The results of this research are transferable and possible to generalise as the research took place with a mix of teaching staff from academic and vocational areas of the Hotel School.

9. Next steps

9.1 Future work.

- Continuing the action research, but using the outcomes of classroom observation as a focus for staff development and to identify areas of good practice that can be shared by staff. This is because it is directly relevant to what is happening in the classroom and therefore to teaching staff.

9.2 Change of strategy.

- The strategy will change in light of the findings made whilst carrying out this project. I would widen the participants taking a broader range from across the college. I would also look at an alternative to focus groups for the reasons already given, because unless there is a time when all participants are free it is very difficult to find common time to meet. If I take the findings from classroom observation activities to develop a data database of bespoke staff development activities that can take place when staff can attend, then this will address some of the issues that have arisen in this project.

9.3 Disseminating what has been learnt?

- Research findings will be disseminated via a presentation at the Higher Education faculty conference in July 2004 and by writing an article for the City College Norwich Research Bulletin for autumn 2004.

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11. Supporting documents

Materials

It is anticipated that, by the end of the project, workshop materials will be produced to facilitate individuals to identify their own staff development needs that will engage the participant in a positive way.

Workshop materials produced include an explanation of Action research for focus group participants (appendix 2) and a summary of the colleges identified staff development needs for 2002-3 (appendix 1). I have also included the materials from the workshops.

12. Bibliography

Appendix

1. PDP and appraisal analysis for 2002/3
2. LSDA Action *Research* project, handout on action research
3. LSDA Action Research project, workshop 1
4. LSDA Action Research project, workshop 2
5. Research based staff development; workshop 3

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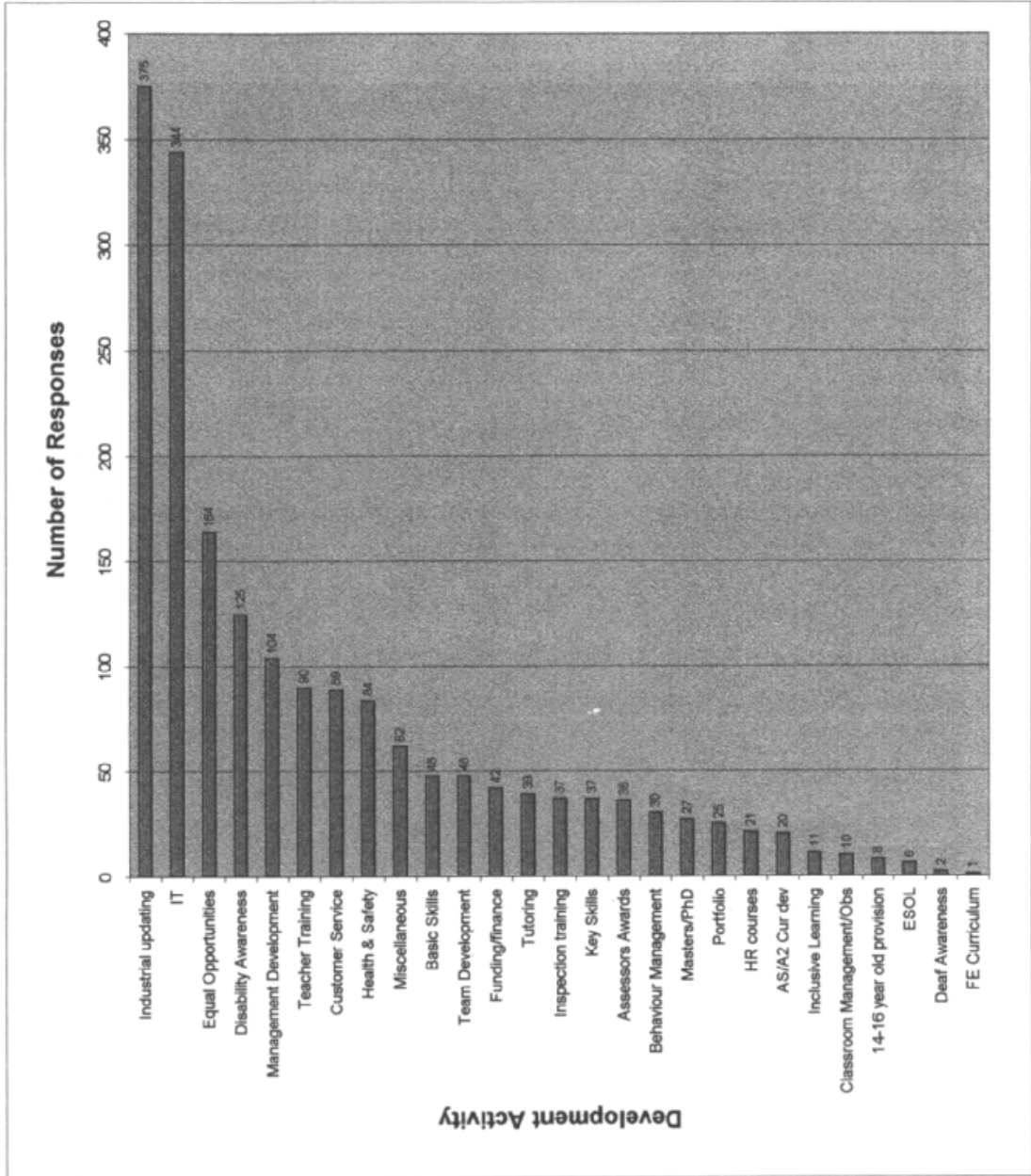
LSRN conference notes.

13. Appendices

1. PDP and appraisal analysis for 2002/3
2. LSDA Action Research project, handout on action research
3. LSDA Action Research project, workshop 1
4. LSDA Action Research project, workshop 2
5. Research based staff development; workshop 3

Appendix 1 PDP and appraisal analysis for 2002/3

PDP and Appraisal Analysis 2002/2003



Documents Analysed	Count
PDPs	660
APPs	153
Total	813

Development Activity	No of requests
Industrial updating	375
IT	344
Equal Opportunities	164
Disability Awareness	125
Management Development	104
Teacher Training	90
Customer Service	89
Health & Safety	84
Miscellaneous	62
Basic Skills	48
Team Development	48
Funding/finance	42
Tutoring	39
Inspection training	37
Key Skills	37
Assessors Awards	36
Behaviour Management	30
Masters/PhD	27
Portfolio	25
HR courses	21
AS/A2 Cur dev	20
Inclusive Learning	11
Classroom Management/Obs	10
14-16 year old provision	8
ESOL	6
Deaf Awareness	2
FE Curriculum	1
Total	1885

Includes academic and support staff
Does not include HMP staff.

Correct as at 10 June 2003

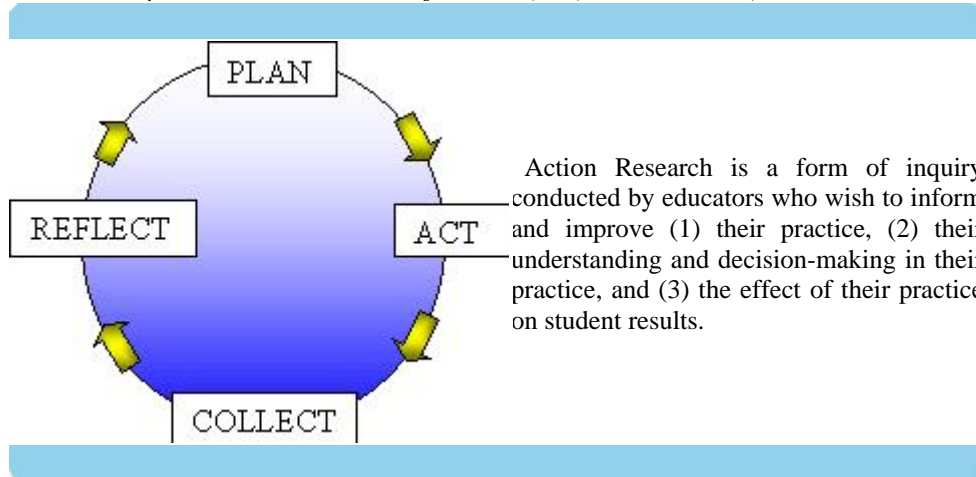
Appendix 2. Handout LSDA Action Research project

Research based staff development

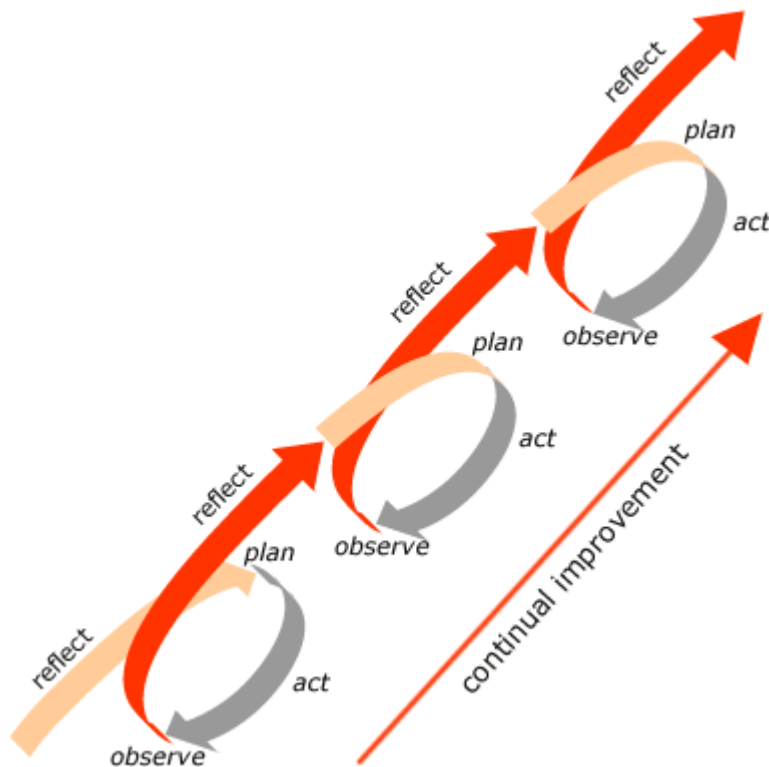
The project aim is to use **action research** to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke **staff development** opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.

The action research cycle

There are four basic steps in the action research cycle:-Plan, act, observe/collect, reflect/review



These steps are repeated in sequence as work progresses, creating an upward spiral of improving practice.



<http://education.qld.gov.au/students/advocacy/equity/gender-sch/action/action-cycle.htm>

Appendix 3.

LSDA Action Research project; workshop 1 Research based staff development

The project aim is to use **action research** to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke **staff development** opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.

Workshop 1.

The aim of workshop 1 is for participants to identify their own areas of staff development needs.

Format of Workshop

1. Explanation of action research and the role of the focus group (VH)
2. Discussion/explanation of what is meant by staff development and that the focus is on individual not corporate needs. (VH)
3. In pairs participants are to consider their own staff development needs (individual not corporate) (ALL)
4. Focus group to discuss/share staff development needs to consider areas of similarity/difference. Outcome, to identify areas of need.(flip chart)(ALL)
5. Group to consider how best to address these needs (annotate flip chart)(ALL)
6. Each participant to take an area of identified need and to consider how best to address this before the next meeting in mid Feb and to consider how this could be measured?(ALL)
7. Evaluation of workshop.(ALL)

Workshop materials

PDP/appraisal analysis-'development activity' from JS as a discussion document

Evaluation form for focus group meeting

Brief overview of the action research process and the role of the focus group (1).

Attendance sheet

Appendix 4
LSDA Action Research project; workshop 2
Research based staff development

The project aim is to use **action research** to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke **staff development** opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.

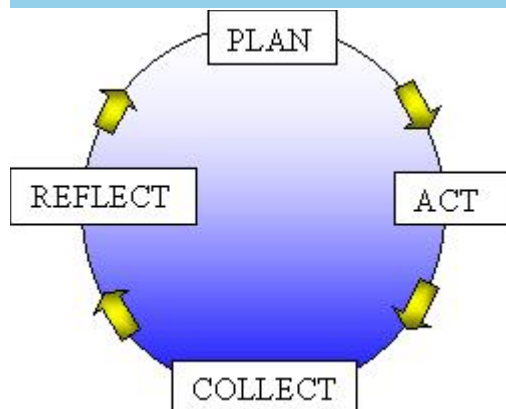
Workshop 2.

The aim of workshop 2 is for participants to reflect on their action research and to plan the next stage.

Format of Workshop

1. Review and reminder of action research , continual improvement and the role of the focus group (VH)
2. A short group exercise on the barriers to staff development, see handout.(ALL)
3. Each participant to take the area of their own staff development need identified in the first workshop and to reflect on how they addressed this (is this measurable?)(ALL)

Reflect, plan, act and collect/observe.



Action Research is a form of inquiry conducted by educators who wish to inform and improve (1) their practice, (2) their understanding and decision-making in their practice, and (3) the effect of their practice on student results.

4. Each participant to **reflect** and **plan** the next stage of the research process and to **act** on it before the next meeting.
5. Evaluation of workshop.(ALL)

Workshop materials

Evaluation form for focus group meeting
Attendance sheet
Barriers to staff development handout.

Appendix 5
LSDA Action Research project
Research based staff development; workshop 3

The project aim is to use **action research** to investigate current lecturers' skill demands and produce bespoke **staff development** opportunities and strategies based on identified areas of need.

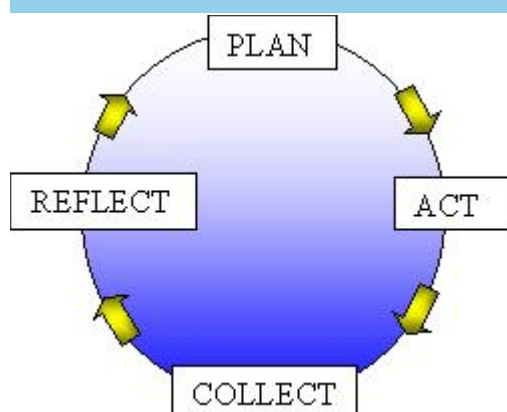
Workshop 3.

The aim of workshop 3 is for participants to reflect on their action research and to reflect on the use of action research to determine their own staff development in the future.

Format of Workshop

1. Review and reminder of action research , continual improvement and the role of the focus group (VH)
2. A short group exercise to audit participants previous staff development activities, see handout.(ALL)
3. Each participant to take the area of their own staff development need identified in the second workshop (or after the second workshop) and to reflect on how they addressed this (is this measurable?)(ALL)

Reflect, plan, act and collect/observe.



Action Research is a form of inquiry conducted by educators who wish to inform and improve (1) their practice, (2) their understanding and decision-making in their practice, and (3) the effect of their practice on student results.

Each participant to feedback on their own experience of the action research process and how it might help with their own staff development in the future.

4. Evaluation of workshop.(ALL)

Workshop materials

Evaluation form for focus group meeting

Attendance sheet

Audit of own staff development.