This Translations article offers an overview of how pK-12 art teachers can implement Action Research in their classrooms. The word research may conjure up images of long hours in the library, surrounded by books, but it can also be a way of “living the questions” that emerge in the art classroom (Shagoury & Power, 1999). Schoen (2007) reminds classroom teachers that “The fresh insights that are gleaned through a process of questioning, assessing, investigating, collaborating, analyzing, and refining instruction empower educators in their daily practice” (as cited in Keifer-Boyd, 2013, p. 246).

The methodology of Action Research is related to the philosophical traditions that ground the broader research methodologies of qualitative research. In the last 10-15 years, the field of art education has relied on qualitative research methods to investigate the varied relationships between the Arts and education. Action Research conducted by art teachers has a more specific focus: It investigates how teaching practice and student learning can be improved at a classroom level.

What is Qualitative Research?
Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings (not in laboratories), attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). This qualitative meaning-making is distinct from quantitative meaning-making, which is statistically driven.

What is Action Research?
At the heart of Action Research is a teacher’s sustained and careful examination of questions concerning teaching and learning in the classroom for the purpose of changing and improving student learning. Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (2006) claim that when we “speak as teachers informed by our own research, we can control the fires and inform the noisy public about what works in our classroom” (p. xvi). As Eisner (2002) stated, the profession needs research from those “closest to the situation who can make the sorts of adjustments that are needed to suit the local circumstances” (p. 149).
In addition to research questions independently generated by the classroom teacher concerning her teaching practice and student learning as described above, Action Research can also examine research questions prompted from an external education source. For example, the Professional Teaching Goals and Student Learning Goals developed at the school district level could prompt an Action Research study in an art teacher’s classroom. Teachers would follow the same procedures outlined below to carry out an investigation of a school-district-initiated learning goal.

**Action Research in the Art Classroom**

The implementation of Action Research is particularly appropriate in the art classroom. As contemporary art educators—especially those teaching in culturally diverse communities—know, their teaching methods are constantly in flux as they strive to adapt to the unique learning needs of students with varied experience. Action Research is ideally suited to the illumination of these dynamic and unique aspects of teaching and learning that might otherwise go unnoticed. After all, institutions such as schools are comprised of the unique demographic of individual students—a reality that argues for an epistemology of the particular (i.e., qualitative research) to inform classroom practice (Griffiths & MacLeod, 2008, pp. 125-126).

**Implementing Action Research**


1. **Planning the Study**

**Identifying the research problem.** In the first phase of the planning process, the teacher reflects on students’ learning behaviors in the classroom, identifying what is and is not working well. For example: Why do students’ final self-portraits lack personal meaning? Next, the teacher begins to think about how various teaching methods might be affecting the learning goal he or she wants to achieve. For this example, the teacher might consider what would happen if students used personal sketchbooks for brainstorming ways to to include more meaningful ideas in their self-portraits before beginning the assignment.

**Forming the research questions.** In Action Research, teachers form open-ended questions that ask what might happen when certain changes are made in instructional procedures. Given the example of an identified research problem, a main research question could ask: What happens when 5th-grade students use their sketchbooks to generate multiple ways to paint a self-portrait before beginning the painting assignment? This stage also involves defining the key terms that appear in the research questions (in this example: sketchbook, self-portrait painting assignment, etc.).

2. **Selecting the Research Methods**

**Identifying new teaching strategies for the instructional unit.** The teacher conducting the Action Research study will have made some assumptions about how new teaching strategies might affect a desired student-learning outcome. Given the example of a research problem and research question, the teacher might present students with a series of questions about the multiple aspects of their personal identity that could be explored in their sketchbooks. These new teaching strategies would be integrated into the instructional unit the teacher had previously implemented.

**Selection of research participants.** Although all students in the class will be involved in the study, it is a common practice in Action Research to select three or four students as the sample. These students are used for in-depth data collection such as one-on-one interviews.

**Data collection strategies.** The choice of any data collection strategy is useful only if it has the potential to directly inform the research question guiding the study. That said, there are three general kinds of data that are most relevant to classroom Action Research studies: Student Work, Teacher-Generated Data, and Interviews. The data collection strategies (see Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 2006, pp. 71-79) inform the data collection methods described below.

Student Work is a valuable data source that can include reflective writing, student art, journals and logs, chronological portfolios of student work, and tests and performance assessments. The teacher can also pull data from informal student work: doodles, notes, sketches, personal websites, and student-generated publications.

Teacher-Generated Data could include evidence from teacher observations such as videos and photographs of student behavior/artwork, the teacher’s research journal, field notes, classroom logs, and checklists. Teacher documents—including progress reports, charts, inventories, and artifacts—are also of value.

Interviews provide one of the most important data sources in Action Research. Formal, tape-recorded interviews take place one-on-one with the three or four selected students. Interview data can also come from informal conversations with students or by noting conversations between students. Written responses like those found in surveys or
questionnaires can fall within the category of Interviews, as can taped-recorded classroom discussions among student groups.

**Permission to conduct the research study.** Before the Action Research study can begin, the teacher will need to get approval from educational administrators and then permission from students’ parents/guardians to conduct the study. When requesting permission from school administrators, the teacher should submit a brief summary of the research plan, including the research problem, research questions, and research methods. The letter requesting parent permission can be less formal.

### 3. Collecting the Data

After the basic methods for conducting the Action Research study are determined, the teacher should begin to examine the art education literature to learn more about the research topic that has been selected—in this case, *personal meaning in students’ self-portraits*. The teacher can begin collecting research data to understand personal meaning-making in student artwork while gathering additional scholarly research on the topic.

The teacher begins to collect research data after new teaching strategies have been implemented. Continuing with the self-portrait assignment example, the teacher may want to start collecting data by talking to students about the images and ideas they are including in their personal sketchbooks. The teacher might also begin to take field notes of students’ behaviors when they are working in their sketchbooks. After the students complete their self-portrait painting, the teacher could start conducting one-on-one interviews about the ideas and images each student has included in his/her sketchbook and completed self-portrait. Whatever data are collected should be carefully organized by date and stored in a secure place.

### 4. Analyzing the Data

The teacher (or teachers, if doing a collaborative study) begins to carefully analyze how the collected data “answer” the research question that guides the study. This can be done during and after the data-collection phase. Each group of data (interviews, field notes, etc.) is analyzed separately by looking for evidence that is relevant to the research question(s). For example, if an interview transcript reveals that one student’s favorite part of art class is “working in my sketchbook because I like to share my sketchbook ideas with my friends,” then the teacher would note this data in her data analysis notebook, because it is relevant to the main research question of the study. In a like manner, the teacher would examine the field notes, research journal, and any other data collected.

After all the collected data have been carefully read and the most relevant data have been categorized to form themes of shared meaning, the teacher is ready to examine how selected teaching strategies have or have not affected the learning goals identified for the Action Research study (e.g., students’ improved capacity to produce personal meaning in their self-portraits).

### 5. Assessing Implications for Practice

The core purpose of conducting an Action Research study is to provide information on how to improve or change a teacher’s instructional methods to promote better student learning. After analyzing the data, the teacher notes in what ways the new teaching strategy affected the desired student-learning outcome. In the example given in this article, the data may indicate that personal meaning embodied in the students’ self-portraits was primarily related to the students’ interest in sharing the ideas and images from their sketchbooks with their classmates—or the data may reveal that there was no relationship between students’ use of sketchbooks and personal meaning in their self-portraits. It is only through the process of writing, reflecting, and using theory along with the data that understandings will emerge that inform teacher practice.

### 6. Restarting the Action Research Cycle

Finally, in Action Research, the teacher uses the data from the first cycle of the study to inform the next cycle of inquiry. New teaching strategies are implemented that will further address the initial question/problem of the study. For example, in the teacher’s next instructional unit, he or she could continue to focus on student use of sketchbooks and add a new teaching strategy based on the findings from the first Action Research cycle. The new Action Research question might state: In what ways does the students’ sharing of their sketchbook ideas and images with classmates relate to their ability to produce artwork with personal meaning? In this second cycle of research, the same steps are implemented—planning the study, selecting the research methods, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and assessing implications for practice.

**Further Considerations for Conducting Action Research**

Despite the linear model of Action Research presented here, it is vital to be aware that research seldom unfolds in a linear fashion. A reflective researcher must carefully examine the research question and data throughout the process. As shared earlier, qualitative research provides opportunities to illuminate what might otherwise seem to be ordinary practice. The very fact that something seems ordinary, routine, or normal could be the call to conduct research.
At the same time, recognize that any teacher—no matter how carefully he or she reviews materials—is always making choices about what to attend to just as much as what to ignore. Classroom research is often best served by ongoing dialogue within a community of teachers who are interested in investigating similar kinds of research questions. When teachers share the rich descriptions of student behavior from their field notes and research journals, new insights about the meaning and nuance of the data can emerge.

No matter what questions prompt art educators to conduct Action Research, the process can be viewed as an opportunity to spotlight and enhance their teaching pedagogy and professional practice, and therefore student learning. Illuminating sound pedagogical practice strengthens the field of art education and advocates for the power of the visual arts in the lives of students.

**Highlights**

Some of the key concepts of Action Research as discussed in this article are:

- **Action Research** is a means of digging into a deeper conversation with yourself as a teacher to examine the impact of your professional and pedagogical practice and *change* classroom practice, not just *interpret* it.

- **Action Research** includes phases of planning, methods, implementation, analysis, and then assessment, when new instructional practices—based on the findings of the first Action Research cycle—shape the next Action Research questions and implementation.

- **Action Research** draws from a number of data sources that are qualitative in nature such as student work, teacher observations and documents, and interviews.

- Teachers must critically examine how their personal and professional identities might impact the analysis and interpretation of their data.

- At its heart, **Action Research** is a living and breathing part of the classroom—illuminating what is and what is not working in the classroom.

**References**


