

Moving From Imitation to Innovation: Action Research as an Untapped Tool for Field Workers

By Dr. Kyle Wisdom and Matthew Davidson

Kyle is currently working with the World Evangelical Alliance as the director for Global Advocacy. He served on an area team, worked with local church leaders, and engaged in a variety of research in Southeast Asia.

Matthew (pseudonym) is currently serving as an Area Leader with Pioneers International in Southeast Asia. He also works with local church planters, engages in training, coaching, mentoring, and develops business for access to communities

Why Action Research? My Personal Experience

I (Kyle) have been interested in action research for field work ever since I learned about it during my PhD studies. Action research seemed like a helpful tool to apply at various points in ministry when we felt stuck and did not know how to move forward. Much of what we were and are seeking to do through CP (church planting) among UPGs (unreached people groups) is new. We are pioneering new work, in new places, among resistant people, so there are not clear templates to follow. We need every useful tool at our disposal. Action research unites a classic approach to research, which focuses on producing knowledge, with an emphasis on action in real world settings. It is meant for the field, not the library.

Action research (AR) is a long-standing research methodology which can be applied in a number of different fields, but primarily in the social

sciences.¹ Action research has been used extensively in organizational development. It can help bring together insiders and outsiders, theory and practice, knowledge and action. Action research focuses on an inclusive and iterative learning process that can bridge expat and local differences so each can contribute their strengths. This article describes an extended action research project in Southeast Asia with an expat worker and a local team focused on church planting in a cousin people group.

What we might call classic approaches to research look to develop knowledge or theory, which can be helpful. Many of the challenges in doing CP go beyond theory. Sure, new insights or theories can be helpful, but these insights and theories need to be put into practice. Case studies of what is working in other places are helpful. Case studies can shape our imagination, encourage our hearts, and give us something to imitate ... but we can rarely just copy what someone else has done and expect the same results. I have written case studies, looked for helpful principles, tried to copy what others said would work, and been frustrated. Field workers frequently look for (and receive) help from case studies, but these insights always require translation to a new context with a different team.

What about the idea of a team creating their own case study that fits that team? Why not try and squarely define the team's felt problems and address them through a curated process? It is often through our practice or action that we become aware of missing pieces of information or understanding. These are often the hidden assumptions we can all make. We need to identify these gaps and address them systematically.

The most basic CP challenge I (Kyle) experienced when working with local teams is featured in this article and that most basic thing is, how to sensitively share biblical truth. Like other leaders, I was excited about new possibilities for breakthrough after attending a DMM (Disciple Making

1 For more information on action research, see Adams 2008, Costello 2011, Kuhne and Quigley 1997, and McNiff 2006.

Movements) training back in 2010. I went back to my context to apply it with local colleagues. We trained a number of people but struggled to empower and facilitate an effective, simple sharing of spiritual truth that would lead to a bible study. Answers I heard for addressing this problem were to learn more, train more and more people and hopefully find an apostolic cultural leader, or superspreader who would be effective.

I learned quite a few helpful things and trained a lot of people, but did not see the fruit I longed to see. Of course, we must acknowledge a spiritual dimension in all of this that is mysterious and undeniable. It also took a while for me, and colleagues in our area, to realize there are numerous smaller steps and missing skills within this simple principle of sharing. Other movements I studied seemed to have an implicit understanding that could not be easily explained or transferred to our local partners.

Most ministry contexts are impacted by the personalities involved, the language and culture of the context, and the particular gifts and training of the team (both expats and locals). When we were not seeing the fruit we expected, we wanted to try and adjust what we could of our methods. If our current local partners were not superspreaders, which many movements state is an essential component, should we move on and focus on finding others? That never felt right. These are noble workers with whom I was honored to partner. I am persuaded that I should be a faithful steward of what we have and, like the new Pringles flavors I have seen in Southeast Asia (like “Seaweed” and “BBQ Shrimp”), we need to take on the local flavor. That means we need to do the hard work of figuring out how to move forward within our specific locales alongside the people willing to work with us. Action research is perfect for this.

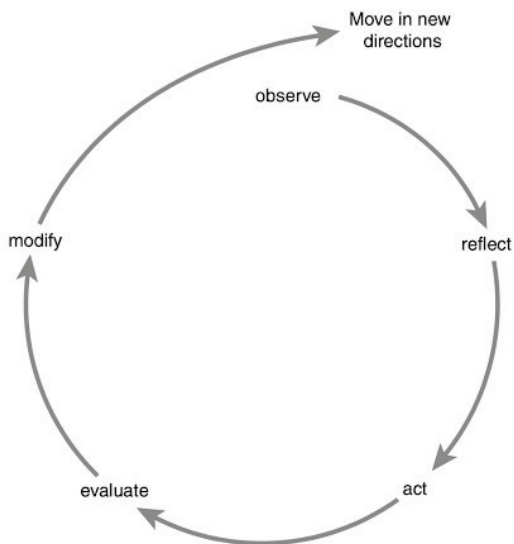


Figure 1. An Action-Research Cycle.

Action research can also be called practitioner-based research because it is primarily focused on one's practice. Rather than develop theories or abstract knowledge, this approach systematically focuses on improving one's own practice. This improvement is sought through shaping a proper research question, designing a research path that fits with the question being asked, and moving through iterative cycles that explore possible solutions with dynamic adjustments along the way. Action research includes action-reflection cycles that follow a simple pattern: observe, reflect, act, evaluate, modify, move in new directions (see action-reflection diagram). To have a complete action research project, and to give enough space to make adjustments over time, the research should include at least three of these cycles (see diagram in figure 2).

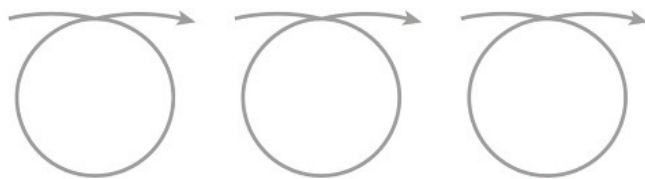


Figure 2. A Cycle of Three Action-Reflection Cycles.

A Team in SE Asia uses AR to Better Engage Seekers

Many of the details for this project deserve a fuller case study. I will aim to communicate enough details to depict the project well, but with an emphasis on describing how the entire process of action research can be implemented in the field. This is only one example. There are different possibilities for how these projects can advance and, like all good research, is tied to the people and context. The field worker (also co-author) and project implementer was an area leader with 20+ years of experience who was working with two local partners with whom he had been working with for quite a while. I (Kyle) functioned as an outside partner providing training, support, and research experience via regular zoom calls from the US. Matthew was the main actor in the project bringing his questions, partners, experience, curiosity, and ability to execute the project in his field context. The research progressed in three basic stages: research design, implementing three action-reflection cycles, and final analysis.

Research Design

Matthew had been supportive of action research since he was my field leader. He had also observed various action research trials with other field workers in his area. He was interested in tackling ministry challenges, and we agreed to collaborate on a project together. The research design took several months and several meetings, as it should, and was initially focused around developing a clear research question. In my PhD studies, I regularly heard that refining a good question was at least one-third of the work of a research project. I think the fruitfulness of this project was connected to a great research question.

We spent a long time discussing Matthew's current ministry situation, sticking points, and the nature of action research to finally settle on his research question: How can I better train the P**** team to sensitively

share biblical truth? This question brought together Matthew's interest in scripture engagement, a coaching style, and the team's challenge of engaging in meaningful spiritual conversations that led to deeper conversations without prematurely stopping. This last point was identified as a core hindrance toward finding a Person of Peace that also aligned with the methodology of action research.

With the research question clarified, we worked together to develop a template for research that would lead us through three action reflection cycles that would address Matthew's research question. This involved talking about his team's values, what they had already experienced, and ways Matthew wanted to train them. We discussed the data to collect along the way, what would be reliable data to ensure we were properly contributing towards answering his question, and how to ensure our findings were not just wish fulfillment or unfounded claims. We decided on the training content for the first cycle; to collect data in the form of field workers notes, photos of white boarded team discussions and a research journal. We had a regular team of four PI workers on our action research calls to provide the first layer of interpretation at the end of each cycle and the conclusion of the study. After finishing the last cycle and writing up the initial findings, we convened a group of experienced field workers to whom we presented the data and invited feedback. Everyone in this group had lived for over a decade in the region (some much longer) and were experienced practitioners.

Action reflection cycles are at the heart of this research methodology. They are simple iterative processes that keep the main research question front and center while adapting and adjusting to insights as they develop. A full cycle consists of observing a problem, reflecting on the problem, acting on the problem, evaluating the action, modifying the approach, and moving in a new direction. This completes a cycle and immediately launches into a subsequent cycle with all the same steps. An action research project should have at least three action-reflection cycles.

Implementing Research Cycles

Our (Matthew's) team encountered a recurring issue: many of the people we contacted via WhatsApp did not respond as we had hoped. When we invited them to study Scripture, their responses were often silence, indifference, or outright rejection, even though they had initially shown interest in spiritual ads on Facebook. To address this, I (Matthew) explored various training options for the P team and decided to use Trevor Larson's Skill 1 – Transformational Dialogue – from his book *Core Skills for Movement Leaders* (2019).

Cycle 1: The Team Learns to Ask Good Questions

During cycle one, I (Matthew) created two lesson plans for the P team. Lesson one defined transformational dialogue as the skill of listening to others, identifying their truth (values), and connecting their truth to how God completes their truth. We also studied Nicodemus, observing how Jesus guided their conversation. The team's homework was to engage in an extended time of observing people in their neighborhoods and talk with one person, asking, "What's been the happiest moment in your life?" and "What's been the saddest moment in your life?" I introduced these questions as a means of "jump-starting" a conversation that could lead to more emotional connection.

At the start of Lesson two, we shared our observations and the responses to our questions. Both Rian and Iwan (pseudonyms) were struck by the emotional reactions they elicited, with one person remarking, "No one's ever asked me that before." Lesson two equipped them with a framework for asking questions and riding or guiding a conversation. Over the following weeks, we conducted 45 interviews, debriefing periodically to document our insights. We identified 28 key insights and categorized them into 1) local characteristics, 2) traditions, and 3) worldview. We decided to focus on two specific themes for the next cycle: family (or influential figures in the community) and community rituals with spiritual implications (such as *Bersih Desa*, *cleaning the village*).

By the end of cycle one, the team had grown in their ability to ask questions, and they recognized how much people felt seen, and heard. The team noticed that deeper conversations often led to spiritual discussions. However, their eagerness to direct people to the Bible sometimes conflicted with the goal of first entering the conversation as learners rather than teachers.

Cycle 2: The Team Learns to Develop Conversations

In the second cycle, we aimed to slow conversations down even more, emphasizing emotional connections before presenting biblical truth. We focused on shaping questions based on people's stories and going back to the same people for deeper dialogue. We also discussed the difference between direct and indirect communication, noting how Jesus used stories and questions to guide people's thinking rather than telling them what to think. We read Scripture together before each meeting and opened up discussion about what the author would have hoped his readers were hearing and then doing. This moved us towards internalizing biblical truths which then could be used in cycle three.

The team selected a few individuals for follow-up conversations rather than conducting a lot of interviews. During debriefs, I (Matthew) would jot down key points from their conversations on a white board and we would create follow-up questions as a group. It became clear to me during this process that my main training objective during the rest of this cycle was to help the team learn how to ask better questions that relate to the context of their conversation. Specifically, questions that would uncover the individual's beliefs and desires—the truth that they live by.

These group discussions became rich learning experiences, something the team highlighted as a key part of the action research process. They began to craft thoughtful questions, like when Iwan asked, "Where did your parents get their wisdom from?" and "What caused you to express so much emotion about your friend's illness?"

Cycle 3: The Team Learns to Bridge to Kingdom Truth

In this cycle, we focused on bridging personal themes to kingdom truth. The first step in transformational dialogue is entering someone's world to hear their story and identify their guiding truths. The next step is showing how God's ways fulfill their hopes, desires, and motivations even more deeply.

We used case studies and Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well to learn how to draw people into deeper discussions about God's ways. For example, Rian's conversations with Sapto and Siti centered on their desire for a *keluarga sakinah* (a family that is steady in the midst of life's trials and able to bring blessing to their community). Rian created a dialogue that bridged Sapto and Siti's desire to the story of God calling Abraham and Sarah to be a *keluarga sakinah* and how they even brought blessing to his own family. This drew Sapto into asking more about how he, a sinful man, could have that kind of community impact.

Iwan focused on the wisdom of the *wayang* (shadow puppets) in his conversation with Sunarti. She loved watching wayang because the stories always provided insight for life. A funny moment happened when Iwan went to the white board and said it really helps him to draw out his conversation. So, he drew a timeline and wrote out the points he had learned about Sunarti. At one point, he exclaimed, "I usually invite someone to study the Bible at this point in a conversation. But I have learned that this rarely works. They usually shut down the conversation."

In a flash of insight, I (Matthew) asked Iwan to draw a second timeline below his conversation with Sunarti. Then I asked Iwan and Rian to write out the facts of the conversation Jesus had with the Samaritan woman. We discussed, "At what point did Jesus invite her to study the Scriptures?" Of course, he didn't do that, but he did use questions and insightful kingdom truth to draw her into deeper conversation. This led into brainstorming questions that Iwan could use to draw Sunarti into wanting to know more about wisdom from the kingdom of God. We called

this a Conversation Map and this practice became a useful tool that spontaneously developed in the midst of our research project.

By the end of cycle three, the team had grown adept at listening to people's stories and crafting questions that revealed underlying truths. They could now analyze dialogues effectively and the Conversation Map became a regular tool. The process of learning together strengthened our fellowship, and the team found it inspiring. Our team's ministry approach shifted from information delivery to being more empathetic. They also observed that they were being more meditative and Spirit-led during their conversations. Finally, in demonstrating that the principles were taking root, they were using the transformational dialogue approach in their own training of other believers.

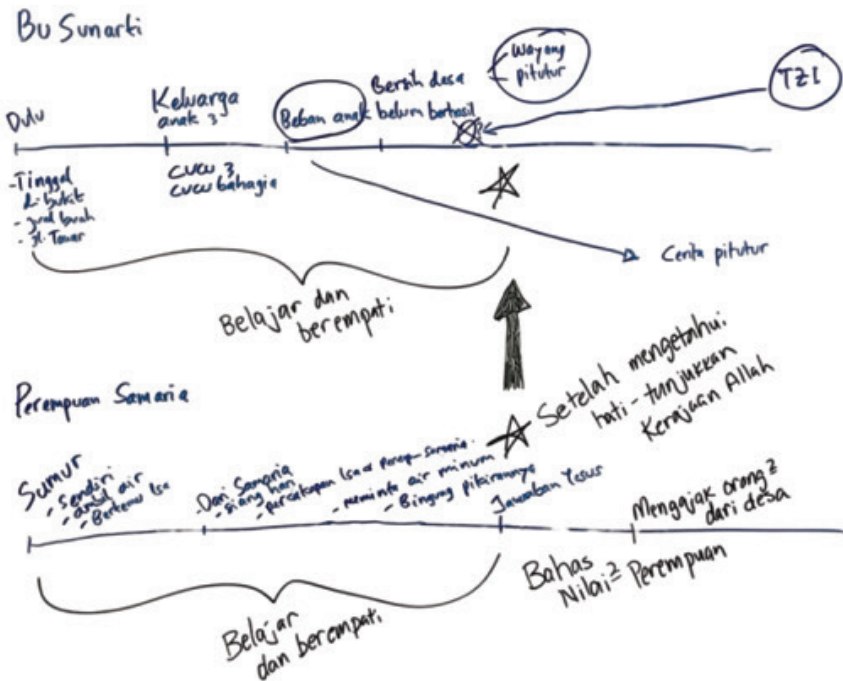


Figure 3. A Conversation Map.

Personally, I (Matthew) gained a practical tool for training others in transformational dialogue and am enthusiastic to share it with others. Through this experiential action-reflection model, I saw first-hand how ideas come up in the context of study and can reveal practices that might become part of our ministry.

Final Analysis

After completing all three cycles, the research team worked to prepare a findings document and collect insights gained from the project. The research team also tested the findings by presenting the project to a validation group. We convened a group of nine experienced field workers and articulated the research process and learning outcomes. Matthew described ways this process affected his work, "We are using the Conversation Map, and it has become a practice that we use almost every week. We have committed to using that as a tool for just evaluating and analyzing conversations to help us become better." In a comment that gets right to the heart of action research, Matthew also said, "you can't just mimic someone's methods, you have to learn how to do this on your own."

The validation group pointed out the strength of learning together with a local team and developing stronger relationships. They observed significant growth in Matthew as an effective trainer and seemed interested in many of the ethnographic tools and questions he used in his training. The group celebrated the learning that occurred through the project and demonstrated interest in action research as a possible tool for field workers.

Conclusion

I (Kyle) have continued to believe in action research as a flexible and methodical tool to apply to problems in certain aspects of a ministry. I am encouraged by Matthew's report on his sense of success at completing this project. At the conclusion of the validation group, he said:

"It does take time. It does take effort. But it has been highly helpful, beneficial, and fruitful for me to go through this process. I just would recommend anybody to try it. It does really give you that intentionality of growth and learning in the direction that you want to move in." My hope is that this application of a research methodology for pioneering field contexts might catch on as another tool workers can have in their toolbox for this vital and challenging work.

If you are interested in developing and implementing your own action research project, you can write to me directly kyle.wisdom@gmail.com. If there is sufficient interest, I can try and put together a learning cohort to do this together.

Questions for Conversation

1. What is your experience with learning from case studies of success from other contexts, and how does it compare with Matthew's experience with action research? What might be the benefits and limitations for sharpening your ministry practice?
2. The team discovered that intentional debriefing and group reflection led to significant breakthroughs. What structures or practices do you currently have in place for reflecting together on your ministry practice? What new practices from this article might be applicable in your team context?
3. What is one recurring challenge in your context that seems resistant to conventional solutions? How do you think the action research cycle or a similar process might help you address this challenge systematically?

Bibliography

Adams, David. 2008. "Putting Heart and Soul into Research: An Inquiry into Becoming 'Scholar-Practitioner-Saint.'" *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 25 (2-3): 144-57.

- Costello, Patrick J. M. 2011. *Effective Action Research: Developing Reflective Thinking and Practice*. London: Continuum International.
- Kuhne, Gary W., and B. Allan Quigley. 1997. "Understanding and Using Action Research in Practice Settings." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 73: 23-40.
- McNiff, Jean, and Jack Whitehead. 2006. *All You Need to Know About Action Research*. London: Sage.