

Chapter 4

Using Action Research to Develop a Public Programming Strategy for Heritage Assets, With an Example From South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The literature on action research and how it should be applied is extensive. However, this chapter is not intended to be a substitute for or to provide a synopsis of the substantial body of literature on action research. Its aim is instead to show the potential benefits of this underutilised research approach in heritage management research. Although there are many varieties of action research, the major elements of action research processes are action, research, and participation. Action research has a collaborative social change agenda, with democratic transformation being achieved through the participation of professional researchers and practitioners. It bridges the divide between the outsiders (researchers) and insiders (stakeholders), and differs from many conventional research strategies in that it identifies a problem and attempts to provide a solution that leads to a change in the community or organisation. The case study on developing a public programming strategy for archival institutions in South Africa presented in this chapter illustrates this point.

INTRODUCTION

Action research is a participatory, collaborative and democratic approach in the development and application of practical knowledge that encompasses all stakeholders in the context of a scientific inquiry. According to Cooke and Cox (2005) action research has been used to positively change behaviour, and transform and improve the social context in which it occurs, “for example in sustaining social move-

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ments, in international development, in education, in social work, and in (confronting) psychology” (p. xxxi). Compared with other research approaches, action research provides real “added value” (Eikeland, 2012, p. 9), and it bridges the gap between “outsiders” or “knower-researchers” and “insiders” or “known-researched” (Eikeland, 2012; Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff, 2014). The research results that are arrived at collaboratively by the researchers and participants are used to transform and guide a practical development intervention.

The literature on action research and how it should be applied is extensive, as evidenced by the numerous articles, books, handbooks and journals on the subject, some of which are included in the list of references at the end of this chapter. However, a search of the top ten journals indexed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases in each of the fields in heritage studies (i.e., archives, libraries and museums)¹ revealed only limited use of participatory approaches in describing, explaining, exploring and understanding the dynamic research matters in the field. There may be a variety of reasons for this, the first being the emphasis on ‘publish or perish,’ causing researchers in heritage studies to choose an easier research approach, and thus to shy away from an approach such as action research, which is relatively complex and sometimes questionable. Second, a lack of understanding of this transformative and emancipatory research strategy owing to the existence of a variety of hybrids of action research may contribute to its low uptake. Third, the fact that until the 1990s action research struggled for legitimacy made it a late entrant into the arena of field methods (Noffke & Somekh, 2009). Fourth, emerging researchers struggle with the conflicting and contradictory messages in action research texts about conducting action research and its characteristics (McNiff, 2014). These four obstacles constitute real difficulties for heritage professionals even if they were to think about implementing action research to inform their practice.

Texts that aim to make the action research approach accessible, especially to those who are new to the field, are therefore extremely valuable. The application of action research may lead to the production of actionable and practical knowledge, proving the criticism that most of the knowledge that heritage management practitioners produce has little relevance to heritage management to be unfounded.

Action research offers heritage management professionals an excellent opportunity to improve their practice and open communicative spaces in which to explore pertinent issues on the main agenda of heritage institutions, such as the presences and absences in heritage collections, equity in the utilisation of heritage assets, the sustainability of heritage assets and appropriate funding models. Communicative spaces provide an opportunity to engage in a constructive dialogue among stakeholders, and facilitate the development of sustainable solutions for the betterment of society. In other words, communicative spaces open the dialogue of communicative action among stakeholders.

The objective of this chapter is to encourage heritage professionals to think systematically about how to conduct action research, including how to overcome the epistemological, ethical and quality assurance difficulties associated with it as a research approach. Having read this chapter, readers should therefore be able to:

- Explain the relationship between action research and research philosophical perspectives;
- Understand the principles of action research and appreciate what counts as action research;
- Understand the various types of action research;
- Appreciate how mixed methods approaches have been used in action research;
- Discuss ethical considerations in action research;
- Establish quality in action research studies;

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