

## In Pursuit of Change and Understanding



**Bob Dick** is an Australian academic who has done pioneering work in both action research and developing 'learning' websites. Many doing this degree have already benefited from accessing Bob's Southern Cross University's [action research site](#). Born a Presbyterian, and by nature rational and skeptical, he has come to value metaphor and story. He feels the later complements the former – or is it the other way around? As an action researcher, coming from a scientific background, Bob is well placed to lead this dialogue on action research and other methods.

To read Bob's introduction [click here](#)

To initiate the dialogue Bob invites you to read this [interview](#)

The abstract, his themes, lessons and thoughts on action research are especially valuable.

Using this Hotseat:

Please take a moment to read the questions that have already been posted to see if your question has been answered.

If your question has not been asked then:

1. Type your question in the ASK A QUESTION box and click POST QUESTION.
2. You may also post an answer to a question by typing your answer into the YOUR RESPONSE box and clicking POST ANSWER.
3. Return later to see if your question has been answered.

### [Ask a question](#)

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**77 questions:** displaying question 11 through to question 15

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Bob Dick posted on Tuesday 18 Jan '05 at 11:33:01 AM

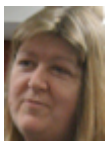
**Q.** Dear colleagues

Let me take this opportunity to say how much I appreciate the warm welcomes and the intelligent questions. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

Cheers -- Bob

 Your response

Do you  just comment  agree  disagree



Debrah posted on Tuesday 18 Jan '05 at 2:14:33 PM

**Q.** Hello Bob and welcome, my question relates to the task we have been set regarding action enquiry/research. My initial idea was to research the role/value of play in child development and to use observations as a means to collect data, but from your experience do you find it better to be more specific, ie role/value of play in social development? Any suggestions from your vast experience would be appreciated greatly. Many Thanks Debbie



Bob Dick posted on Wednesday 19 Jan '05 at 2:07:00

**A.** Hello Debbie. Thanks for the question.

Action research can be a very flexible research methodology. It's therefore possible to begin with a very general question. You can refine it as the research progresses. That means you have a choice about how specific a research question you develop.

In fact it's not even necessary to have a research question. If you have a research situation and some wish to improve it, that can be enough. Your more general research question would be fine, in my opinion.

Here's a version of an action research cycle I sometimes use to think about my research: fuzzy questions -> fuzzy methods -> fuzzy answers -> less fuzzy questions -> less fuzzy methods ...

Cheers -- Bob



Denise posted on Sunday 23 Jan '05 at 12:19:30

**A.** I like this fuzzy business Bob, makes me feel more ready to branch out and explore! Denise



Bob Dick posted on Sunday 23 Jan '05 at 23:56:09

**A.** Yes, Denise, that's part of the reason I like it too. Cheers -- Bob

Your response

Do you  just comment  agree  disagree



Maureen posted on Tuesday 18 Jan '05 at 3:43:11 PM

**Q.** Hi Bob & a warm welcome to the Hotseat! For my last Action Enquiry I looked at introducing change in the workplace and I found the resources on your website really useful - thank you - especially those that looked at involving participants in the change process. For my AE project, which I've discussed with my Head, I'm thinking about how we can improve the effectiveness of the way we communicate with parents. I'd be grateful for your suggestions on the best way I could go about gathering this data. I'd thought about a questionnaire to parents but that's about it! Thanks in advance.



Amy posted on Tuesday 18 Jan '05 at 21:11:47

**A.** Hi Bob. I too am looking at communication with parents through a new weekly newsletter I produce and in assessing it's effectiveness I also want to involve staff and pupils as well as parents - would a written questionnaire be most effective for all groups or should I use different methods for each group?



Bob Dick posted on Wednesday 19 Jan '05 at 2:17:38

**A.** Thanks for the gracious comments about the web site, Maureen. I'm pleased when people find it useful. That's why it was created in the first place.

I'll occasionally use surveys to provide background information to help other processes. Otherwise I seldom use them in my own work, for two reasons. One is that I often don't know what questions I should have asked until the survey is over. The other is that surveys are usually less involving of the participants. That can reduce resistance to change.

There are ways of reducing both of these disadvantages. So feel free to ask about them if you wish.

In your position I'd begin by thinking about who can usefully be involved. There's a technique called stakeholder analysis which can help in doing this. See:

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/stake.html>

I would then involve them in deciding what improvements are needed, what information is useful, and how to collect it.

Warm regards -- Bob



Maureen posted on Thursday 20 Jan '05 at 8:19:32

**A.** Thanks a lot for this. I think a general survey could be useful to provide us with some useful background data so I'd be interested to know how we might get round the disadvantages you mention. I'd like to try and arrange either to interview or meet with a cross-section of parents to get their views but the timescale is very tight for the project. If I started with a questionnaire, perhaps I could ask interested parents if they'd be willing to talk part. One disadvantage to this is would it be a representative cross-section? Your views would be appreciated. Thank you.



Bob Dick posted on Thursday 20 Jan '05 at 9:49:14

**A.** Hello Amy

Sorry about the delay. Someone I omitted to upload my response. I noticed it now only because Maureen's addition was flagged as "new today". (Your reply follows, Maureen.)

What will get you the best information, do you think? You know the sort of information you need. What method will get it for you? You know the people better than I do. What method would suit them best?

Both options (all surveys, or different methods) have disadvantages and advantages. For instance if you use only surveys you can make comparisons between the groups. That's useful. There are several important disadvantages. One is that you may not know if you've asked the right questions until it's too late. Another is that written surveys may not suit all of your informants.

Sometimes you can manage the disadvantages. For instance you can use some "catch-all" questions in a survey. "What else would you like to tell us?" is an example.

(If this was for a thesis I'd say "It doesn't matter what you do provided you give a good enough reason for doing it".)

Warm regards -- Bob



Bob Dick posted on Thursday 20 Jan '05 at 9:59:57

**A.** And hello Maureen. You ask how to get around the disadvantages of surveys.

I had mentioned two disadvantages. The first was that sometimes you don't find out until the end of the survey what questions you should have asked. You can sometimes reduce this problem by first doing some open-ended interviews to identify which issues are most salient for people. Sometimes a small group of people from those you intend to survey can also advise you about the survey questions and coverage.

I also said that surveys were less involving. Interviews are more involving and can ask the same questions as surveys. Sometimes you can run surveys with groups of parents (perhaps a neighbourhood at a time). This has the added benefit that more people respond. Response rates to written

surveys are notoriously low.

There's a group based approach to written surveys called group feedback analysis.

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/gfa.html>

This may also give you some ideas.

Warm regards -- Bob



Bob Dick posted on Thursday 20 Jan '05 at 10:06:08

**A.** A further thought, Maureen ...

Have a look at my answer to Jeanette, just down a bit on page 4. You may find that useful.

Cheers -- Bob



Denise posted on Sunday 23 Jan '05 at 12:29:36

**A.** Hi Bob, Does it help to fully inform the participants why you are asking the questions, "I am asking these question to gain insight into.....", or do you think this will be off-putting or affect the reply? Thank you, Denise



Maureen posted on Sunday 23 Jan '05 at 19:29:45

**A.** Hi Denise. I think I've read somewhere that this is one of the principles of participatory action research ethics - informing the participants fully of what we are doing. So, if the participants are to be actively involved in our research, then surely we need to explain why we are asking the questions? Maureen



Bob Dick posted on Monday 24 Jan '05 at 0:05:48

**A.** Hello Denise and Maureen


It's great to see this hotseat turning into more of a

conversation.

I agree with you, Maureen, that it is good ethics to inform people fully. I'd add that it is also very helpful in building better and more trusting relationships and achieving better outcomes.

When people don't tell us the purpose of their research we tend to mistrust their motives. This undermines the relationship. It discourages us from telling the truth. It reduces our cooperation.

Warm regards -- Bob

 Your response

Do you  just comment  agree  disagree



Nadine posted on Tuesday 18 Jan '05 at 6:09:46 PM

**Q.** Hi Bob and welcome. I have been looking at the different practice-as-inquiry methods including critical inquiry, narrative inquiry and reflective practice. I personally favour Schon's reflective practice, may I ask what methods you have used and how these methods have been beneficial?



Bob Dick posted on Wednesday 19 Jan '05 at 2:22:12

**A.** Hello, Nadine. There are many to choose from, aren't there. I usually design an action research process to suit the situation and the intention of the research. Where possible I like to do this in conjunction with the other participants in the project.

Each of the action research methodologies has its particular advantages and disadvantages. I can often design a process which incorporates the advantages of several. In this regard

participatory action research can be a generic process into which other processes can be integrated.

For instance, I like the models and processes of action science for developing a critical and supportive climate in the research team. I agree with Don Schon that reflection is important, including the "reflection-in-action" that he encourages. For some purposes appreciative inquiry is useful in developing a positive and energetic atmosphere. And so on.

Warm regards -- Bob

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