

## Participatory Action Research

Juan D. Machin-Mastromatteo & Javier Tarango  
Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, Mexico

**The final version was published as (please use the following reference when citing it):**  
Machin-Mastromatteo, J.D., & Tarango, J. (2019). Participatory action research. In R. Hobbs & P. Mihailidis (Eds.). *The international encyclopedia of media literacy* (vol. 2, pp. 1195-1202). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118978238.ieml0178>

### Abstract

This entry provides an introduction to Participatory Action Research as a research methodology that consists on the implementation of actions by a researcher to study the practices, habits, activities or behaviors of participants and support them in achieving a state of improvement through their reflection and active engagement. It provides its characteristics, epistemology and ontology, components, advantages, difficulties and common criticisms; as well as the relationship and basic insights that are necessary to apply such a participatory methodology to educational contexts as well as to develop Media Literacy initiatives.

Keywords: participatory action research; research methods; practices; social improvement; learning

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a participatory and mainly qualitative methodology that consists on the implementation of actions by a researcher to study the practices, habits, activities or behaviors of participants and support them in achieving a state of improvement through their reflection and active engagement. PAR is derived from Action Research (AR), which emerged during the 1930s and 1940s. Lewin (1946) is largely acknowledged as its originator, as he sought to carry out a reflective social practice within an industrial setting to study workers' struggles to overcome disadvantageous situations, so he conducted a comparative research that centered on the conditions of such environment, the effects of social actions and what led to them. AR was then seen as applied social science, which focused on the effects that researchers' actions have within a participatory community in order to discover or improve their practices. An AR process is undertaken by groups of people or communities to focus on knowledge generation from problem-solving, group dynamics, intergroup relations and the improvement of people's conditions through the rigorous and logical study of realities and needs. An AR study is conducted in a cyclical manner through the following stages, which are often cited as the cycle of AR or AR spiral (see Figure 1): diagnostic or analysis, planning, action or intervention, observation, evaluation and reflection (McTaggart, 1991; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). These stages may be repeated several times during a period of time until the people involved are satisfied and it can even be repeated *ad infinitum*, with the purpose of establishing a continuous improvement process.

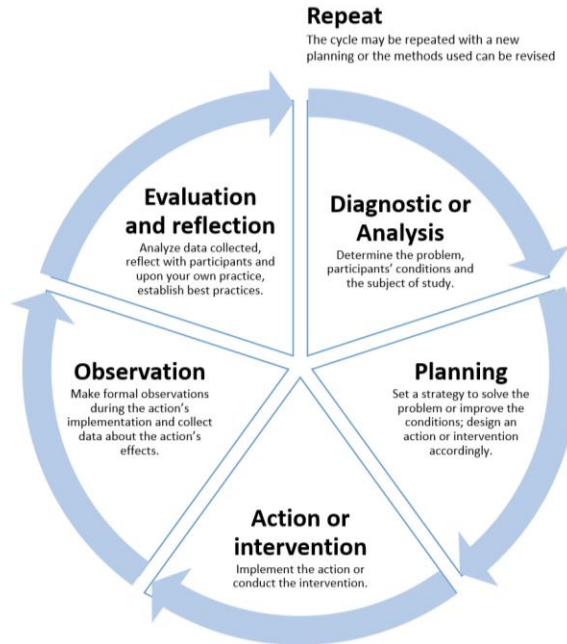


Figure 1. The action research cycle

AR developed into diverse branches, such as cooperative inquiry, action science and PAR. Many researchers consider AR and PAR as synonyms and so they have been used interchangeably; while others consider that the differences among them are subtle but often overlooked. However, PAR stresses participants' commitment to the goal of the study, as they embark on a collaborative endeavor, implying that the researcher works with the participants from his or her own knowledge, mediating a common understanding from their knowledge, practices and realities (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Epistemologically, PAR studies are characterized by the interactions between theory and practice in order to analyze changes or improvements taking place or being fostered on the studied situation or environment; such analysis must involve implementing one or several actions and then its effects must be determined through individual and collective reflection. Ontologically, PAR does not entail a conventional distinction between what is being researched, who is researching and the research process itself; so, it is different to other methodologies that see the researcher as a metaphorical 'fly on the wall'. Hence, PAR researchers may be more involved in the study and take part on it as other kinds of participants, because they are expected to take actions during the study that may create different dynamics and alter the situation. Apart from working with participants' insights and inputs, researchers can also reflect upon their own actions and practices within the study.

PAR challenges the conventional power relations between the researcher and the participants or subjects of a study. PAR researchers must define their position within their own research, because this allows establishing various epistemological, methodological, ethical and trustworthiness issues pertaining to a given study. Researchers' positionality is determined by the setting and researchers' relationship with it, so positionality can be of an insider or outsider to the setting, but there are many possible permutations. Herr & Anderson (2015) compiled six possible positions that PAR researchers may assume: a) insider (researcher studies own self/practice); b) insider in collaboration with other insiders; c) insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s); d)

reciprocal collaboration (insider- outsider teams); e) outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s); f) outsider(s) studies insider(s).

PAR researchers have come from many different backgrounds, such as management, organizational theory, community development, sociology, education, political science, and library and information science. Hence, PAR has been permeated and enhanced by different fields, making it a versatile methodology that is not grounded on a unique theoretical framework (McIntyre, 2008). This wide variety of researchers has also influenced the application of very different methods and instruments in PAR; which is often seen as an advantage. In order to assess and evaluate a PAR implementation, conventional methods and data collection instruments, such as questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups and statistical methods can be used; but it can include others, such as integrating or developing learning activities, strategies and interventions during the research process as its actions; and also diaries and other documents produced by the participants (e.g. essays, drawings, video or audio recordings), because they allow collecting richer and more detailed data to analyze participants' reactions to the actions undertaken. These other elements can also be considered methods or instruments that cause participants' reactions and effects that are documented by them. These reactions and effects are observable or measurable with the aid of conventional instruments, and methods of analysis can be applied to their contents.

PAR centers on the reactive effects experienced by participants, due to the presence and actions of the researcher that is immersed within the participatory community, which is constituted by the participants and the researcher. PAR implies a collective commitment with the subject of study, the improvement of practices or situations, and with the work that researchers conduct with participants from their own knowledge to mediate a common understanding that harmonizes everyone's knowledge, practices and realities (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Using PAR involves certain complex difficulties: a) generating a genuine collective commitment from all participants toward the research; b) establishing a unanimous desire to undertake a reflective and collective participation; c) have the participants make joint decisions to undertake individual or collective actions that lead to the benefit of all involved; and d) constructing successful alliances between researchers and participants that allow planning, implementing and disseminating the research process (McIntyre, 2008). Other PAR challenges are often mentioned as criticisms: a) its particular epistemologies and ontologies; b) researcher's positionality and their level of participation in their own research connect with the issue of avoiding bias, if the researcher is working closely with the participants and is planning and conducting actions, instead of dealing with participants in a more naturalistic manner; c) there are issues of validity, trustworthiness, replicability and transferability of results, as they are often obtained from studying a group of an unique context with very specific characteristics; and d) PAR often deals with very detailed data, which limits the number of participants that is feasible to study, so a low number of participants is another aspect criticized. However, PAR cannot be evaluated with the same lenses and values of quantitative research and the specialized literature discusses in detail different alternatives for avoiding its difficulties, challenges and criticisms. Common recommendations include conducting PAR in systematic ways for ensuring validity, accumulating a wealth of empirical evidence from diverse groups for making trustworthy and replicable general judgements, and establishing research parameters carefully, following its objectives closely. Trustworthiness largely depends on a deep ethical commitment from the researcher, who must provide a detailed and transparent account of their research and of the data collected prior to presenting a clear analysis.

Participation is critical in any PAR implementation. For McIntyre (2008), participation must have quality before proportionality, as it is unlikely for each party (individual or collective) to participate equally during the research process. Successful participation may occur if the most practical and feasible ways of participation needed are defined and agreed upon at the beginning of the research process, because many different ways of participation might be unintentionally promoted and some may not be useful for the research purposes. Encouraging participation must become an effective dialectical process of research and awareness in participants, which invites them to reconsider their positions or opinions, imagine new ways of being, acting and doing, and critically discuss agreements or disagreements to generate self-reflection and collective scrutiny (McIntyre, 2008).

PAR has a strong relationship with education and instruction processes (formal or informal). As such, PAR seeks to transform educational processes through the application of social actions throughout the participatory research of such processes. This line of research is seen as urgent in order to collectively improve the inclusiveness of education. Among the most recognized PAR approaches related to education and literacy is Freire's (1970), who emphasized the active participation of community members in their education, sought to collapse the professor-student dichotomy, and the elimination of power relationships and oppression. More recent approaches consider that critical self-examination allows discovering the weaknesses of outdated didactics and students' lack of interest, as well as pointing toward the researchers-professors-facilitators own faults and allowing a permanent questioning of educational issues, a deeper understanding of educational processes and an awareness of the practical issues that can be solved (Vezzosi, 2006).

PAR's relationship with Media Literacy (ML) has been characterized as a new hope for the research and practice, although this is not always explicitly acknowledged throughout the specialized literature nor by practitioners conducting literacy activities (e.g. Information Literacy [IL], Digital Literacy, ML) in their institutions (Machin-Mastromatteo, Lau & Virkus, 2013). Researchers have been revisiting this methodological tradition to find a better ground to base their literacy actions upon. They aim at establishing the use of participatory methodologies (specifically PAR) for conducting literacy activities as a perfect fit, understanding that they are the most appropriate methodologies because they have the primary goal of improving participants' situations, while all literacy activities and initiatives are performed to improve a certain situation (e.g. improve people's use of information, media or technologies). PAR goals are emancipatory in nature and are aimed toward improving people's practices and situations, while the development of literacies strive to develop more informed individuals, independent information, media and technology users, as well as fostering critical thinking; all of which contributes to the betterment of an individual, groups, and of society.

PAR's application in ML education and training must consider the context where such learning takes place, participants' level of instruction, the presence or absence of technologies, the purposes of learning, the ML competences that are sought to be improved or developed, and the role of researcher-professor-facilitator that is assumed by those leading or carrying out the PAR-ML initiative.

The activities, strategies and interventions, as well as the places where they are developed and the resources used to support their implementation are elements that integrate learning environments, which can be physical or digital and that allow to study diverse topics related to ML by using PAR, such as: a) preferences and behaviors that determine the use of information and media; b) acceptance level of a particular technology; c) development of critical thinking; d) analyses of experiences within traditional classrooms and technologically mediated environments;

e) improving research, learning and knowledge generation processes, regardless of the scientific discipline; and f) study the use of diverse technologies for learning (e.g. blogs, wikis, social media, videogames). The study of learning environments leads to the generation of new questions regarding how learning takes place in a determined space and what are the implications of the particular contexts and conditions of a given group; it also allows searching for new ways of collecting and analyzing data on the contents or educational resources used and on the interactions among participants (Gee, 2007).

Contrary to traditional didactics, learning processes undertaken through PAR are not linear, hence its objectives are accomplished through cyclical processes of exploration, knowledge construction and actions, which are carried out at different stages of the experience (McIntyre, 2008). PAR is a 'living dialectics' process that changes the researcher, the participants and the situations or realities in which they act (McTaggart, 1997; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). PAR must be implemented through the development of a cyclical model in which action and reflection are two aspects in constant interaction and complementarity. Each cycle starts with a general idea about a topic of interest that will drive the construction of a plan for action, which is examined and revised according to the expectations, restrictions or obstacles toward it, then the action is performed and subsequently evaluated (Zeichner, 2004).

Before starting a PAR cycle, it is important for the researcher to communicate and explain the research purposes, objectives, its basic design, participation expectations, and ethical considerations to its participants. It is important to undertake this preparatory work in order to obtain participants' informed consent, ensuring their engagement and participation, reaching the necessary agreements between the researcher and the participants, and their commitment toward the common goals and agreements established. After performing these actions, the implementation of a PAR cycle for ML education through the typical five-stage cycle, can be conducted as follows:

1. Diagnostic or Analysis: it includes undertaking activities or using data collection instruments and methods to determine the problem, participants' conditions and the subject of study. Performing such diagnostic and analyzing it is key to drive all other stages. For instance, in this stage is important to determine participants' profile regarding their use of media, as well as assessing the current state of their ML competences and needs.
2. Planning: the elements that emerged from the analysis of the diagnostic performed in the previous stage allow identifying the characteristics to change or improve and setting a strategy, design an action or intervention to address them accordingly. For instance, given participants' ML competences and needs, a workshop can be designed to improve competences and help participants address their needs through the researcher's mediation.
3. Action or Intervention: the actions, strategies and interventions are implemented in this stage, it is important to add the application of data collection instruments and methods to measure actions' proceedings and results. For example, the action implemented is intended to cause a didactical deconstruction of ML practice in order to solve the problem under study, it can involve the ways participants use and evaluate a new kind of media for different purposes, such as professional, educational, or personal.
4. Observation: practice is reconstructed through participants' cognitive dissonances or paradigm shifts that foster dialectic reflections, as well as allowing problem-solving and improving practices. This stage is often conducted in parallel with the previous one. For instance, after delivering a workshop to improve participants' ML, a practical activity can

be implemented in order to systematically observe what participants do to tackle the activity given to them.

5. Evaluation and Reflection: implies feedback, establishing best practices, and evaluating or assessing the effectiveness of the reconstructed practice and of the PAR cycle. Data collection instruments and methods must be heavily used in this stage in order to determine the actions' effects, results and successfulness, as well as their impact for improving participants' situations, and their satisfaction with the whole process. This stage implies the establishment of the best practices related to the subject that was studied. For instance, participants reflect upon their use of a certain media resource and establish the best practices to use it and harness its possibilities for enriching their ML. Additionally, the researcher may carry out an action or the participants can require further actions, both of which may lead repeating all the stages; depending on the purposes of a given research and a PAR implementation.

A PAR-ML implementation seeks to deconstruct practice from a retrospective analysis conducted through different methods, instruments or strategies. It allows searching for practical solutions to detected problems, questioning everyday issues by studying the practical implications of theories, tools, techniques, behaviors, emotions, and rites (customs, routines, habits). These aspects can be deconstructed and then reconstructed through the development of solutions, improvements and best practices.

PAR has a strong connection with educational, research and ML processes, as it seeks to study recurring and novel issues that emerge from everyday practices of professors, researchers, students and professionals. It directly involves participants in the development of research and in the generation of solutions. PAR provides the researcher-professor-facilitator the possibility of criticizing, problematizing, analyzing and suggesting improvements to participants' actions to perfect their performance. Using PAR invites to explore, reflect, identify issues, collect evidences, implement actions and analyze the effects of a given change or transformation. Hence, it can be instrumental for improving or enhancing the ML conditions of a given sector or group through a systematic methodological design that considers the active participation, engagement, reflection and revision of practices by all its members, which is an effective means to build initiatives intended to develop ML competences.

## References

- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gee, J. (2007). *Good video games and good learning: Collected essays on video games, learning and literacy*. New York: Peter Lange.
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34–46.
- Machin-Mastromatteo, J., Lau, J., & Virkus, S. (2013). Participatory action research and information literacy: Revising an old new hope for research and practice. *Communications in Computer and Information Science*, 397, 48-53. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-03919-0\_5
- McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- McTaggart, R. (1991). Principles of participatory action research. *Adult Educational Quarterly*, 41(3), 168-187. doi: 10.1177/0001848191041003003

- McTaggart, R. (Ed.). (1997). *Participatory action research: International contexts and consequences*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Vezzosi, M. (2006). Information literacy and action research: An overview and some reflections. *New Library World*, 107(7/8), 286-301. doi: 10.1108/03074800610677272
- Whitehead, J., & McNiff, J. (2006). *Action research: Living theory*. London: Sage.
- Zeichner, K. (2004). Investigación-acción y el mejoramiento de la docencia en la educación superior. *Uni-pluri/versidad*, 4(1): 61-72. Retrieved from <https://aprendeenlinea.udea.edu.co/revistas/index.php/unip/article/viewFile/12087/10962>

#### Further reading

- Chevalier, J., & Buckles, D. (2013). *Participatory action research: Theory and methods for engaged inquiry*. New York: Routledge.
- Hepworth, M., & Walton, G. (2009). *Teaching information literacy for inquiry-based learning*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing.
- Kincheloe, J. (2011). Critical pedagogy and the knowledge wars of the Twenty-First Century. In K. Hayes, S. Steinberg, & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Key works in critical pedagogy* (pp. 385-405). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. doi: 10.1007%2F978-94-6091-397-6\_29
- Simpson, D., & McMillan, S. (2008). Is it time to shelve Paulo Freire? *Journal of Thought*, 43(1-2), 3-6. Retrieved from <http://journalofthought.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/05simpsonmcmillan.pdf>
- Whitehead, J. (1989). Creating a living educational theory from questions of the kind 'How do I improve my practice?' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 19(1), 137-53.