

Action Inquiry at Lankelly Chase

We describe our work as an 'action inquiry' into what it takes *to promote change in the systems that perpetuate severe and multiple disadvantage*.

Within this there are sub-inquiries, which we refer to as **knowledge, power, place, field and governance**.

What is Action Inquiry?

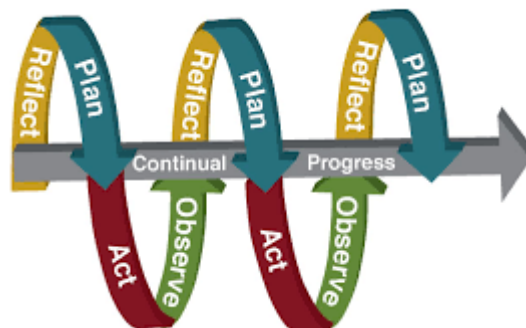
It is an approach in which practitioners iteratively reflect on their implemented strategies to learn about how and why they work. They then adapt their strategies accordingly.

Another way of putting it is *taking action while at the same time noticing how a situation is developing and making necessary adjustments*.

The process involves engaging in repeating reflective cycles which consist of:

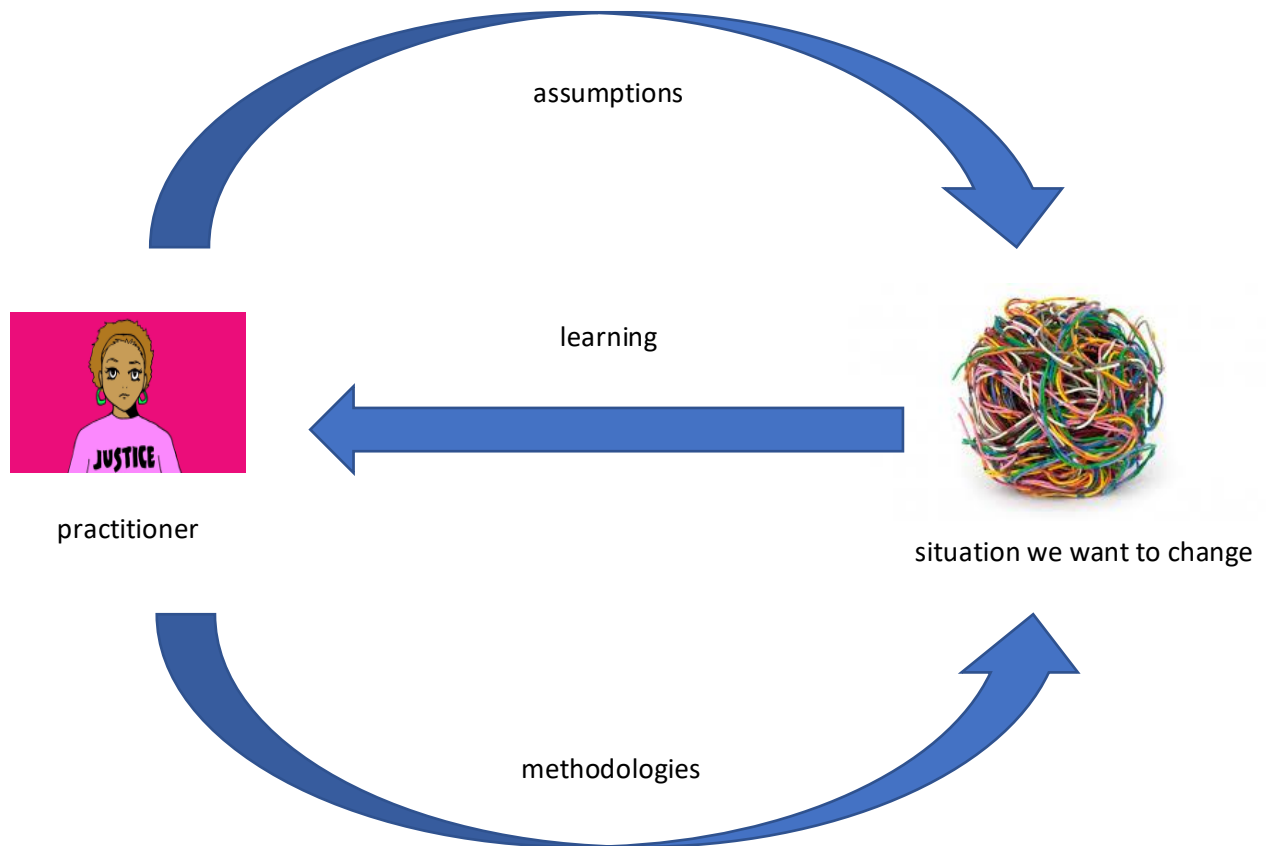
- planning action intended to bring about a desired change
- undertaking action
- observing the consequences of this action on the context of change (especially unexpected effects)
- reflecting on the meaning of these observations, making sense of them and the implications for the planning of future action

It is often represented as a loop or spiral:



Important note! In practice the process is not likely to involve such a neat linear progression between the stages. It is much more 'messy' in reality.

We've sometimes represented it in our work (a bit) like this:



This model is designed to show how an action inquiry practitioner who is taking action needs to be explicit about their methodologies and their assumptions, so that both can be revised in the light of changes in the situation in which they are intervening.

What is it *not*?

Action inquiry is not a set of instructions, and it is not a process that can be followed in a mechanical way.

It is not (quite) the same as Action Research, which is considered to be inquiry informed by a theoretical body of knowledge and with an intention to contribute to that body of knowledge. This is not always the case for inquiry in a practice situation (like ours).

Why is it our chosen methodology?

"The approach is suited to change strategies in social [settings]. In these situations the effects of change may not be easy to predict due to the complexity of factors involved"

Sound familiar?

We don't know how to promote change in the systems that perpetuate severe and multiple disadvantage. We do have a broad hypothesis (the system behaviours) but we need to test this, try different things, learn about their efficacy or otherwise and change course if necessary.

We are not really adopting action inquiry as a *new* methodology. We've actually been using it (albeit instinctively) since 2011.

We are now intentionally using it to describe what we do, to remind us to stay open to different ideas and to reflect on our own role in things (our assumptions, biases and behaviours). This should help us achieve greater shared vision and purpose and more rigour in our approach.

Necessary elements

- A clear rationale for the planned action, informed by an existing theoretical body of knowledge or previous experience.
- Processes to inform judgements about the extent to which the action has had an effect.
- Reflection leading to a rich descriptive picture of the context of inquiry considered from a variety of perspectives.
- Reflexivity, or critical self-awareness (people describe personally transformative effects when the practice is embraced as part of daily life and relationships).

We work with external learning partners to support us in these things.

Possible pitfalls

There are some things we need to watch out for as we develop our action inquiries.

- Action inquiry just becomes a fancy term for a conventional programme of activity.
- The term 'inquiry' stops bold action being taken – action is at the heart of an action inquiry, 'inquiry' is the mindset with which it is approached.

Participatory? Systemic?

As with any methodology, there are numerous variations on the theme of action inquiry. Two of the most relevant to us are participatory and systemic approaches. These involve a wider range of co-inquirers from different parts of the system working together on all aspects of the action inquiry cycle. These processes aim to build accountability, ownership and momentum for change at a range of different levels.

More information

This is a very basic and partial overview. There's obviously loads of stuff online for anyone who wants to delve deeper and we have our own resident experts in the form of Carrina, Alice and Julian.