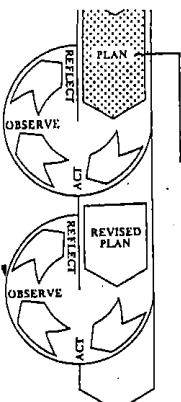


Ref:

THE GENERAL PLAN

Identifying your general idea



General idea
 Reconnaissance
 Field of Action
 First Action step
 Monitoring
 Timetable

You do not have to begin with a 'problem'. All you need is a general idea that something might be improved. Your general idea may stem from a promising new idea or the recognition that existing practice falls short of aspirations. In either case you must centre attention on

- What is happening now?
- In what sense is this problematic?
- What can I do about it?

General starting points will look like—

- I would like to improve the ...
- Some people are unhappy about ...
What can I do to change the situation?
- I am perplexed by ...
- ... is a source of irritation. What can I do about it?
- I have an idea I would like to try out in my class.
- How can the experience of ... be applied to ...?
- Just what do I do with respect to ...?

Avoid issues which you can do nothing about. Questions like the relationship between socio-economic status and achievement, between ability and tendency to ask questions in class may be interesting but they have tenuous links with action. Stick with issues in which you do something which has potential for improvement. Remember that strategic action is your way to improve practice and your understanding of apparent and real constraints on change

Examples of ideas linked to action

- Everyone talks about the 'enquiry method'. My students seem to prefer working on problems to which answers are not yet well known. How can I shift the emphasis in my teaching to enquiry methods. How can I make my questioning more 'enquiry oriented'?
- I have heard a lot about every teacher being a teacher of English and I try to encourage language development through my teaching. I wonder if getting students to tape record and transcribe their discussions will help to make them more sensitive to the language they use.
- From chatting with parents I can see that they are as dissatisfied with 'parent-teacher nights' as the staff. What do both groups think can be done to improve parent-teacher interview situations? How can this be realistically implemented?
- Students are dissatisfied with the methods by which they are assessed. How can we collaborate to improve student assessment?
- Students seem to waste a lot of time in class. How can I increase the time students spend 'on-task'?
- Parents are fairly keen to help the school with the supervision of students' home-work. How can we make their help more productive?
- I talk to some of my students more than others. Who are they? What kinds of exchanges mark them out as different? Is it something about them or something about me? If I record the class discussion maybe I can change my pattern of interaction so that more students can participate in my lessons.

You will notice that each of the examples has two important characteristics; each begins with a recognition of what is presently happening as a basis for thinking about issues, and the emphasis is on trying something out ... on doing: on developing strategic action as a variation of existing practice.

You should now try writing down four or five ideas which might be explored and acted upon in your situation. Try to link the idea, present practice, and strategic action which will lead to improvement. Write about thirty words for each.

Keep the issue relatively small. No matter what you do, it will have effects outside the one you intend. You can decide later how far you want the task to extend. Working outwards is easier than contracting an oversized project.

Your task now is to select one of these ideas to act upon. In choosing the area in which you prefer to work you must attend to the following criteria:

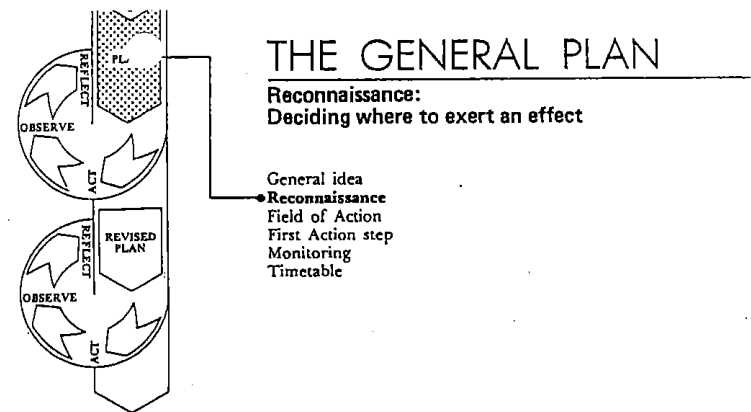
- How important the issue is to you
- How important it is for your students

THE PLANNER

- What opportunities there are to explore the area
- Who might be interested in helping
- The constraints (practical and political) of your situation
- The manageability of the task

Remember that radical transformations are not easily achieved: be prepared to be sustained by modest success.

Settle on an idea you can do something about.

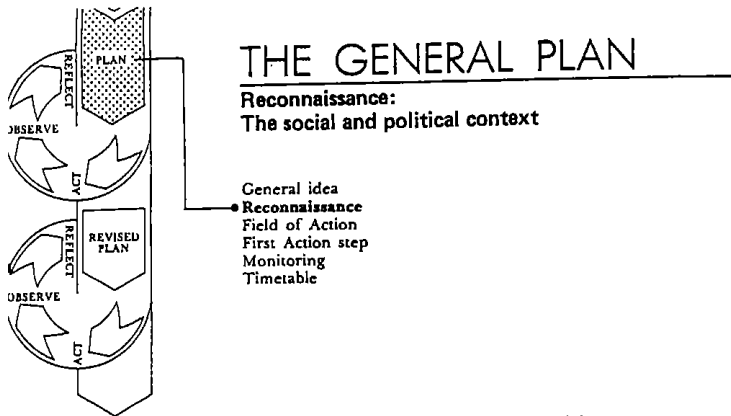


The reconnaissance stage of action research seeks to engage your general idea in action; to express the general idea in relation to its context; to define the field of action. What is happening already and its social and political context in the school or classroom puts limits on the field of action. You cannot begin with large-scale changes; reconnaissance will help you to decide where you might best exert an effect. Writing down some of the constraints and opportunities may help to define the field of action realistically. You are likely to find gaps in what you know; you may need to do some preliminary fact-finding to help you define the field clearly enough to begin (even if your description cannot be complete). You will find the summary of techniques for collecting data included in Appendix A (p. 49) useful if you wish to explore a little before making your decision.

Action in the substantive context

Articulation of your field of action requires you to attend to such questions as:

- What is happening already?
- What is the rationale for what is happening already?
- What are the opportunities to implement action which reflects the general idea?
- Exactly what aspects of present practice am I trying to change?
- Can I devise three or four changes in strategy that might be worth trying out?
- What are the possibilities?
- What are the constraints of content, time resources, manpower?
- What is realistic given the importance of the issue?
- What constraints are 'absolute' and which might be negotiable?



What can be achieved is very obviously dependent upon the social context in which your action is to occur. You must now anticipate some of the effects of your intended action

- Who is affected?
- Who else is involved?
- With whom must I negotiate?
- What are the opportunities, possibilities and constraints?
- How am I to protect the rights of those involved or affected in—
 privacy?
 confidentiality?
 discretion?

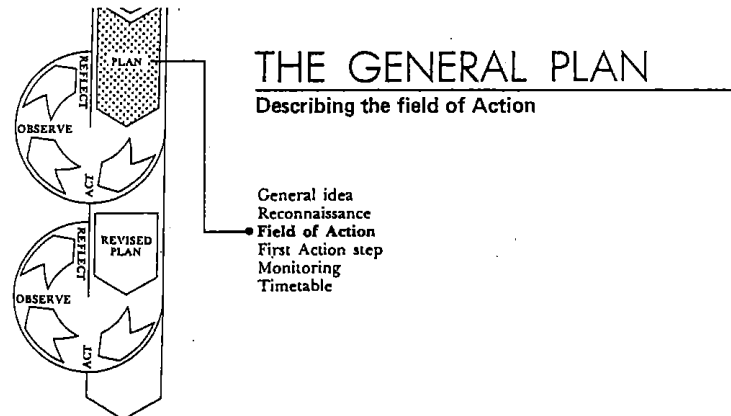
This is the time for—

- fact-finding • explaining • negotiating
- describing • discussing • amending

Be bound in your negotiations and agreements by your *Principles of Procedure* (Appendix B p. 43)

Explain your intended field of action to a 'critical friend': someone who will listen to your ideas and respond realistically and constructively. Incorporate his or her advice into your plan so far where this is appropriate.

You must now distil the interaction between your general idea and the opportunities, possibilities and constraints of both substantive and social and political contexts. The final phase of your reconnaissance is to set out clearly your working description of your field of action.



Write your working description of your field of action. Include:

- What is being done now.
- What you intend to change.
- The rationale for what you presently do and the particular change you are planning.
- What you intend to leave unchanged (and is close enough to your field of action to warrant thought).
- What form your most likely strategic action will take. (You may find it helpful to list two or three possibilities at this stage.)
- Things which are still subject to resource availability and negotiation.

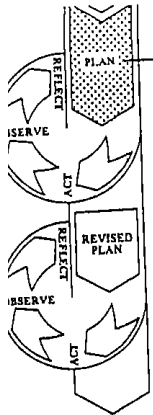
You now have three tasks to complete before completing your General Plan and implementing your ideas:

- Deciding which is the appropriate action step to take first.
- Deciding how best to monitor the effects of your strategic action—intended and unintended.
- Working out a timetable to realistically structure your work.

THE GENERAL PLAN

Defining the first action step

General idea
Reconnaissance
Field of Action
First Action step
Monitoring
Timetable



You will have considered already some of the action strategies which you might employ in your field of action. Indeed you will be aware of the effects that some strategies might have and how these effects could be monitored.

It is now time to select and construct in detail the plan of your first strategic action—the first action step. Remember to think strategically—try to choose action which will lead not only to improvement but which will help you to know what to do next. The plan of the first action step should include:

An exact description of what you are going to change in your practice this time. You need to specify this clearly—there will be a tendency to drift away from your planned strategic action once you begin. Make sure you have a clear idea of what you are trying to do so that you can sustain the action long enough to observe it as a process and also the effects it exerts.

The rationale for the strategic action you are planning. The rationale consists of reasons which make the action strategic. The action is strategic in two senses: (i) it aims at an improvement in practice and the situation, and (ii) it aims at greater understanding of the practice and the situation. Say why the action is likely to improve the practice (or the situation) and why it should 'work' (this is your first conjecture about how students learn through this practice, the way the curriculum works, the effects on participants of the school organisation and other such matters).

The effects. Describe the intended effects of your strategic action. You should also indicate here any side effects, positive or negative, which you could anticipate. Show how you will deal with negative effects.

People who are involved. List them and what they have agreed to do—including monitoring if you have sought assistance with this. Check that everyone is aware of obligations and commitments under the Principles of Procedure. You may need to describe how people are involved generally and in the longer term as well as their specific engagement in the first action step.

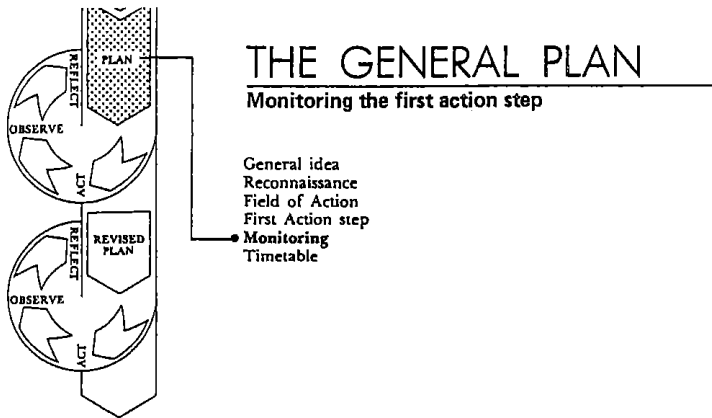
People who are affected. You must anticipate how people (other staff, students, parents, other community members) might react. Describe how you plan to accommodate these reactions—they may be positive or negative. Take care to decide which people need to be informed and to agree to the Principles of Procedure. Do you need permission to carry out this action step or your overall plan? From whom? In writing? How do you intend to inform people about your project? Who needs to know?

Resource requirements. Describe the materials, space, room changes, equipment and other things you need for this action step. It may be helpful to think about future resource requirements as well. (There is no need yet to specify equipment needed for monitoring—that comes next.)

Likely constraints and problems. List possible sources. You must negotiate difficulties in order to have an impact. However, do not expect to anticipate everything; social change is always unpredictable to a degree. Be prepared to grapple with the unanticipated and unintended—it is an opportunity to learn to act more wisely and strategically next time.

Confidentiality. Remember that you may gather information which can be misused. Describe carefully your procedures for maintaining confidentiality.

The description you have given of this first action step is of crucial importance. As you return to it in subsequent cycles of the action research process, you will be able to revise the entries you have made under each heading. In this way you can build improvement across cycles and document your progress.



The purpose of observing or monitoring is to provide you with information and impressions necessary for reflection, to know what happened. Knowing what happened then provides the basis for the development of the general plan of action and the improvement of strategic action in subsequent cycles. The understanding of what it means to have implemented changes leads to wiser and more prudent practice in the future.

There are three general kinds of questions you will need to be able to answer:

In relation to the strategic action as a process:

Did you do what you planned to do?
If not, exactly what form did the strategic action take?

In relation to the consequences of your strategic action:

What were the intended and anticipated effects?
What were the unintended and unanticipated effects?

In relation to the circumstances of your strategic action:

In defining your field of action (and the first action step) you took account of the substantive and social and political context in which you had to work. The action you have taken will have pushed against the constraints of circumstance and in some cases will have revealed new possibilities. How have the circumstances (or your understanding of them) changed?

There are two important things to consider during the action, its consequences, and the circumstances in which it occurs. The first is that your observation 'technique' must be able to take account of the unanticipated and the unintended. You must, therefore, remain open to new and changing impressions of what is happening, but at the same time create

a history of events and your changing perspective on them. The best way to do this is by means of a diary. No matter what other techniques of monitoring you use always use a diary to record events and impressions as they occur. It will help you to sustain a sense of progress.

The second implication is that because the circumstances, action, and its consequences will have a meaning for all participants in the situation, these can be taken into account as well. That is, we can develop a more complex composite picture using data collected from a number of perspectives. For example, if one of your colleagues has been taking photographs of you working with groups of students, you might like to use each photograph to compare and contrast—

- your recall of the event
- the 'photographer's' perceptions of the event, and
- the students' perceptions of the event.

You may go even further and ask the students to respond to your interpretation and so on. You may add to the mix of perspectives the particular comments you recorded in your diary the day the photographs were taken. This technique of combining different perspectives on a multiple source of data is known as triangulation. It is a useful way of adding subtlety and comprehensiveness to the portrayal of your work.

To summarise: your monitoring phase will build a picture from a number of perspectives across the circumstances in which the strategic action occurs, the action itself, and the consequences it generates. The completion of a table like that in Figure 5 may help you to check that you have covered the relevant perspectives and areas for your action step.

Figure 5: Building a portrayal using multiple perspectives

	Circumstances Substantive and social and political context	Action The strategic action as it happened—as a process	Consequences Intended and unintended; anticipated and unanticipated.
Action researcher: the participant observer			
Others e.g. Pupils			
Colleagues			
Administrators			
Parents			

Choosing your techniques for monitoring

In Appendix A you will find brief descriptions of a number of monitoring techniques

- diaries
- logs
- item sampling cards
- portfolios
- anecdotal records
- field notes
- ecological behavioural description
- document analysis
- questionnaires
- interviews
- sociometric methods
- interaction schedules and checklists
- tape-recording
- video-recording
- photographs and slides
- tests of student performance

In most cases you will glean enough from the description to make a start on your own investigation. Do not hesitate to have a try at devising a suitable method (or adapting an existing method) for your own issue. If you want further information about the techniques you will find Colin M. Hook's *Studying Classrooms*, Deakin University, 1981, the most productive place to start.

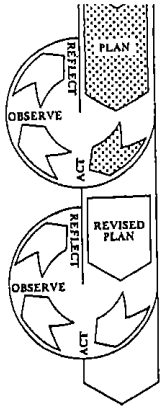
You will find the following questions helpful when you begin choosing the approach most suited to your strategy and situation.

- Is it one that you can do?
- Do you need a colleague to assist?
- Will it provide information useful for reflection? For your next action step?
- Will a different technique be more appropriate?
- With what technique should you combine this one?
- How soon will the technique provide data?
- Can you maintain the technique over time?
- Can you set aside the time to gather data and process it as a basis for reflection?
- What are the physical implications of your techniques?
 - Is there enough space to use it regularly?
 - Can you get the equipment regularly?
 - Are there enough power points?

Do you have filing space?
Can you get good enough microphones or buy film?

- How useful is the technique for
 - group reflection
 - personal reflection?
- How much exposure do you intend to give the data?
- Has the technique the potential to become second nature in your daily routine?
- What will be the political effects of gathering this data in your classroom, department, school or community?
- Who should know (not know) about it?
- What are the risks to you or others through you having the data?

You should now select (or devise) the appropriate techniques for your project. List them together with the particular kinds of questions which they will be used to address. You should try to cover as many of the cells of Figure 5 as you can; but remember to be realistic. Your data collection and the reflection on it must be sustained over time—do not become over-committed. Remember that shorter loops of action and reflection will be easier to sustain. Start modestly but carefully and thoughtfully.



IMPLEMENTING THE FIRST ACTION STEP

A final check

Before you implement your first action step:

- Revise your general plan
- Revise your action step
- Check that the resources you need for your action step are on hand
- Check your monitoring techniques and equipment
- Ensure that others involved are aware of their commitments
- Make sure everything (and everyone) is in order and ready to proceed.

Now implement your first action step

