

C

E



Center for
Effective
Organizations

ACTION RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

**CEO PUBLICATION
G 09-06 (560)**

SUSAN A. MOHRMAN
*Center for Effective Organizations
Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California*

MARCH 2009

**Center for Effective Organizations - Marshall School of Business
University of Southern California - Los Angeles, CA 90089-0871
(213) 740-9814 FAX (213) 740-4354
<http://ceo-marshall.usc.edu>**

Abstract

Action research is a process of participatory inquiry aimed at generating knowledge to guide practical action in pursuit of the participants' purposes and outcomes. It can be contrasted with traditional scientific research, which seeks to find the "truth" through highly researcher controlled investigation methodologies. Action research, in contrast, seeks to generate knowledge to find solutions to problems and to enable actors to achieve their goals. It is carried out collaboratively by the actors in a situation, including researchers, who engage in a mutual inquiry process that ideally takes into account the perspectives, knowledge and purposes of all involved. That inquiry process often involves collectively deciding an intervention to improve the ability of the organization or system to achieve its purposes, implementing that intervention, and studying impact. General knowledge to inform practice across different organizational systems is achieved through a series of action research projects that gradually yield reliable knowledge about the impact of various interventions/changes in different contexts. This paper addresses the history of action research, its features, and how it differs from more traditional science-based research.

Action Research: An Overview

Action research is a process of participatory inquiry aimed at generating knowledge to guide practical action in pursuit of the participants' purposes and outcomes. It can be contrasted with traditional scientific research, which seeks to find the "truth" through highly researcher controlled investigation methodologies. Action research, in contrast, seeks to generate knowledge to find solutions to problems and to enable actors to achieve their goals. It is carried out collaboratively by the actors in a situation, including researchers, who engage in a mutual inquiry process that ideally takes into account the perspectives, knowledge and purposes of all involved. Thus the conduct of action research is heavily dependent on the process through which the various people involved in the action research project interact to create new ways of understanding their situation and new paths forward. Action research may include traditional, scientific data gathering and analysis approaches. But it is more generally characterized by inquiry approaches that build on and create the knowledge of practice. It employs different knowledge-generating approaches—approaches that place practitioners and their knowledge front and center. The ultimate test of the knowledge that is generated through action research is whether the action taken because of the knowledge accomplishes the purposes of the participants.

This entry first provides a short history that illustrates the varieties of action research, and then explores the role of the researcher and how action research differs from traditional scientific research. It then explores the common elements of action research, the core process, and the nature of knowledge that is created and applied.

History and Forms of Action Research

Action researchers trace their philosophical roots to Aristotle's notion of goal-directed action (praxis) as one of the key activities of human beings, distinct from theorizing (theoria) and crafting things (poiesis). They also refer to his notion of practical wisdom (phronesis) that is the ability to reflect and determine the appropriate ends to which to direct one's life. This combination of reflecting on appropriate purposes and learning how to achieve them remains central to all forms of action research. Action research involves groups, or communities, of individuals reflecting and learning for action. Individuals represented in the action research group may have different perspectives and goals, thus, effective action research requires group processes for reflection, learning, and consensus building.

The modern philosophical roots of action research may be traced to John Dewey's discussions in the early 20th century of learning through a cycle of reflective thinking about problems, formulating hypotheses about what might solve them, and testing them through practical action. The term action research as an approach to social science research is often traced to the field research tradition begun by Kurt Lewin during the second World War. In this approach, members of various real-life settings such as work organizations participate in research to find better approaches to accomplish their goals. This action research tradition emphasizes formulating theory that can be tested and refined through experiments whose results impact practice—so that the requirements of practice are met and systematic knowledge is furthered. Lewin's belief that the best way to understand something is to change it has been echoed by action researchers ever since.

The Socio-Technical Systems (STS) tradition for improving work systems built on Lewin's field research approach in early investigations that found that productivity is enhanced by leadership styles and work systems that foster the active involvement of employees in decision making and

in running their own work units. These core STS theoretical beliefs were expanded and refined through many action research projects in which the participants in a work setting such as a factory or a mine collaboratively design their own work setting to be technically and socially effective. Researchers involved in this stream of action research provide theoretical input and a process for design and planning. They study both the group processes through which the diverse members of the setting—managers, supervisors and workers—develop a new way of working together, as well as the choices they make about how to organize themselves, and the outcomes of putting these choices into action.

Beginning in the 1980's, the Norwegian Democratic Dialogue approach has emphasized the gathering of various stakeholders (including management, the workforce, government and unions) in conferences in which they can speak with each other as equals about how to move forward on issues such as work organization. The underlying principle is to move from traditional adversarial approaches to cooperation through democratic dialogue, and the purpose is to build relationships and establish a new way of making decisions that take the interests of all parties into account. At about the same time, throughout the world, social justice became the focus in action research activities that emphasized gender and race issues, and in emancipatory work in poor nations that is based on empowering ordinary people by helping them develop the capabilities to generate their own knowledge as a basis for action.

Differences from Traditional Social Science Research

There are several ways in which action research differs from more traditional research. These include the purposes of the research—whether the researcher is out to discover scientific “truth”, or whether the researcher aims to help people accomplish their purposes. Other differences concern where the research is conducted, and the methodologies that are used. These differences

have implications for the relationship between the researcher and the people in the real-life settings being studied.

Purposes

Traditional social science research is based on a search for the “truth” about the phenomena being investigated—whether they are aspects of the physical world as are investigated by hard scientists, or aspects of the social world, as are investigated by social scientists. Scientific truths, as scientists have been able to discover them, are embodied in theories that yield predictions for further investigations to confirm and expand theoretical understanding. In traditional social science research, the quest is to find the truth about the social behavior of individuals, groups, organizations and societal institutions. The social entities being studied are treated as the objects of the research, and it considered poor form to engage with them because the scientist is expected to remain disinterested in outcomes and purposes, and to retain objectivity in trying to explain behavior.

Purposes are central to action research. The quest of action research is to create knowledge that can help participants accomplish their purposes. Various traditions of action research differ in the extent to which they emphasize the use of academic theoretical knowledge as an input to the processes through which purposes are defined and action is crafted. At one extreme are action researchers who believe there is no generalizable truth, and that all knowledge is created in specific situations. Their purpose is not to discover truth, but to introduce frameworks for interaction that enable participants to gather information, make choices, and take action to accomplish their purposes. This is the position of the Norwegian Democratic Dialogue advocates. The action researcher’s role in the conversation is as member of the group who brings knowledge of how to set up dialogues, reflection, and learning. Yet even these action

researchers are guided by their own values and purposes, such as achieving democratic dialogue or emancipation.

Other action researchers, such as STS researchers, have a purpose of contributing to knowledge that is generalizable across settings in addition to their purpose of helping participants in an action setting learn how to generate actionable knowledge. These researchers bring relevant theoretical constructs and the cumulative knowledge of the social sciences – sometimes called content knowledge--to bear in the processes by which participants define and solve problems. The researcher's knowledge of theory and the participants' knowledge of practice are combined to yield solutions to problems and designs for action. Through the action research, the practical knowledge of the participants and the theoretical knowledge of the social sciences are both expanded. These action researchers bring expertise to diagnose problems and to intervene in a way that helps participants solve them. They may train, educate, and facilitate the group, thus assuming a central position in the group.

Research Conducted In Situ

Traditional researchers carrying out studies in the field try to avoid focusing on only one organization. They seek random selection of the populations being studied—sometimes into treatment and control groups-- in order to randomly distribute external factors that might otherwise distort the findings. Action research, in contrast, always is situated in and generates knowledge about a particular social system that has expressed interest in engaging in action research—for example, a work unit, an industry, a community, or a sub-population. It focuses on creating the knowledge generating and action taking capability in that particular system. An action research project enables researchers to learn about one system, and to test and expand theory in only that system. Action researchers who are interested in building widely applicable

knowledge do so through a succession of action research projects in different settings. For example, STS researchers created cumulative knowledge about the participative design of manufacturing systems for high performance through a succession of action research interventions in different factories. Each successive setting presented different challenges and different opportunities for learning. The participants in each setting were interested in creating their own solutions, yet the action researcher brought useful experience and knowledge from previous research. In order to become trusted enough for the other participants to learn from this previous work, the action researcher has to be open to the uniqueness of each setting and of the group of participants engaged in the participative design process—and open to different design choices and resulting action. Only in this way is the research truly participative, and can the researcher learn how the unique factors of the setting contribute to general knowledge.

Research Methodologies

Beyond differences concerning randomization vs. in situ focus, action research methodologies differ from traditional social science research in other ways, including the amount of researcher control over the research, and the data-gathering methods. Traditional researchers conduct research in a carefully controlled manner to eliminate alternative explanations for the results that they find. This generally means that the objects of the research are unaware of the purpose of the research, the research questions, and the hypotheses being tested. This is believed to be necessary so that they do not behave in a manner that distorts the findings—either by trying to act in a manner that fits the expectations of the researcher or by trying to prove the opposite. Highly controlled approaches fit a model where the researcher is seen as having a privileged knowledge-creating role in society, and is given permission to study others. People and

organizations may agree to be part of such research to further science, but often do not believe that it will yield knowledge useful to their personal purposes.

The members of the action research community are, in contrast, co-investigators. Purposes are transparent and they are co-determined by the action researcher and other participants. The research questions are often co-defined by the participants because these questions have to do with the real-life situation in which they exist. If there are hypotheses guiding the research, these also will be formulated and influenced both by the researcher's knowledge from theory and the other participants' knowledge from practice. Finding common purposes and hypotheses to guide the inquiry and action planning process entails finding a process to come to agreement despite differing experience bases, knowledge, and preferences.

The action researcher is one of the participants in this community of co-investigators. As is true for all participants in any group, action researchers face challenges in defining and achieving perceived legitimacy for their role in the group. The group members are being guided to behave in ways they may not be used to—putting aside rank and biases and listening to and building on the perspectives of all. The members of the group may only appreciate the power of a truly participative inquiry process after experiencing it. Only then may they understand collaboration and appreciate the researcher's contribution.

The action researcher who claims to have content expertise relevant to the group's purpose, and who aims to further that knowledge through the action research, faces the additional challenge of achieving legitimacy and trust for that expert role within the group. Theoretical knowledge is likely to be rejected unless the researcher engages with the group and accepts the importance of combining theoretical knowledge with the group members' knowledge of practice to yield an approach that is tailored to the situation and purposes at hand.

Traditional social science research is often characterized by data gathering methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and structured observations that are coded, counted, and analyzed statistically to discover patterns of relationships between variables that are predetermined by the researchers. For example, researchers may be interested in whether the purposes of low status group members are less likely to be voiced and achieved in an action planning process; they may measure the status of each member and ask each member to what extent they felt their ideas were taken into account. Although such traditional methods may be part of an action research project, action researchers generally feel that they are insufficient to capture the complexity of human interaction. These researchers are likely to introduce a variety of ways of understanding the system and to encourage the consideration of rich data including the feelings and experiences of participants and the meanings they attribute to their interactions.

Interpretation of these rich and diverse data is central to the inquiry process. The group members attach meaning not only to systematically collected data, but also to their interactions, including those between the researcher and the practitioners. Academic interpretation is only one perspective in the process of attributing meaning. Given that the group is working to agree on different ways of operating and different outcomes, the academic interpretation may be the least impactful because the participants' criteria are usefulness and relevance. Both process and content knowledge brought to the group's collective sensemaking process by the action researcher will be interpreted in conjunction with the full set of knowledge brought by the members of the group.

Common Elements in Action Research

The broad assortment of approaches that are labeled action research share some defining attributes: a discourse-based learning cycle; an expanded definition of knowledge; and an

inherently political nature. Each of these places strong requirements on the action research group's interaction patterns.

A Discourse Based Learning Process

Action research is a discourse based inquiry and reflection process through which stakeholders and participants in the real-life situation come together to make choices and plan and take action.

If the action research group is able to establish itself as an ongoing learning community, the action and its consequences feed back into the learning of that community, establishing a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, planning and action taking. Common steps include:

1. establishing the group to collectively engage in communication designed to raise consciousness and increase mutual understanding and to create a sense of common purpose
2. inquiring by gathering relevant data and knowledge from each other and other sources, sometimes including scientific knowledge and a formal data gathering process applying formal scientific approaches.
3. interpreting and reflecting on the meaning of the information and knowledge assembled, and its relationship to purposes
4. deciding and action planning focused on solving the problems being addressed and achieving the purposes that the group has collectively defined
5. reflecting on the results of the action that feed back into an ongoing inquiry, reflection, and action taking cycle

A major role of the action researcher is to facilitate that process while modeling it, thereby increasing the capacity of the group to develop knowledge. When this capacity has been developed, all members will function as action researchers.

An Expanded Nature of Knowledge

Scientific knowledge deals with the theoretical connections between variables—and is aimed at answering questions such as whether carrying out a particular action will lead to a particular outcome. A more diverse set of knowledge is required to define effective practice, and making decisions regarding practice requires the group to interpret patterns of information and pull together diverse knowledge sets. Even with a firm grasp of what is objectively known and even with deep know-how about how to achieve particular outcomes, the group is still faced with the challenge of how diverse participants who may not start out knowing or trusting each other can find consensus about how to proceed.

Beyond objective knowledge, two other kinds of knowledge are required for effective action research. One is the knowledge participants develop of each other—relational knowledge—that enables them to understand and feel empathy for the others' points of view. This is the knowledge that allows the group members to go beyond their experience of the world and engage in reflection and action planning that incorporates the views and purposes of others. The second kind of knowledge is the reflective knowledge that comes from a truly collaborative interchange, and that enables the group to be critical of the status quo and to reformulate purpose. It enables the group to get beyond a problem-solving orientation and collectively describe and create their real-life situation as they would like it to become.

Different action research groups and members within the group may begin the process with different competencies in and orientations to these different kinds of knowledge. In work settings, managers and technical employees may be heavily steeped in technical knowledge, and may see relational and reflective knowledge as unimportant to achieving their purposes. First line employees, on the other hand, may orient themselves to these latter forms of knowledge,

which determine their trust of the process and focus them on creating a workplace where they experience meaningful interpersonal relationships and where their purposes are taken seriously. Inherent in effective action research is developing an appreciation for these different forms of knowledge that allow a community of participants to move forward together.

Political Processes

Integral to action research is the capacity of the group to create power dynamics where the members of the action research group are all heard, and their knowledge, preferences and perspectives are taken into account. Words like participative, equal, democratic, social justice, and emancipation are used by action researchers in different kinds of settings. All carry with it the notion that the formerly disempowered will become empowered to influence the choices made and directions taken. Achieving this requires a process where those with formerly privileged knowledge and power, including the action researchers themselves, do not dominate the process. Ultimately the choice of action is politically determined. The goal of action research is to ensure that the political process is participatory, and builds on the knowledge and purposes of the members.

Further Readings

Adler, N., Shani, A.B. (Rami), & Styhre, A. (Eds.) (2003). *Collaborative research in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Argyris, C. (1970). *Intervention theory and method: Behavioral science view*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Greenwood, D.J. & Levin, M. (1998). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change*, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE .

Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. New York: Harper & Row.

Pasmore, W. (1988). *Designing effective organizations: The sociotechnical systems perspective*. New York: Wiley & Sons.

Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry & practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Shani, A.B., Mohrman, S.A., Pasmore, W.A., Stymne, B. & Adler, N. (Eds.) (2007). *Handbook of collaborative management research*. Thousand Oaks: CA: SAGE.