

## 14 Learning and Change through Action Research

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### Historical roots

Action research has a long history, going back to social scientists' attempts to help solve practical problems in wartime situations in both Europe and America. Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 1445) trace its origins to the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s to design social experiments that could take place in natural settings. Lewin is credited with the phrase 'Nothing is as practical as a good theory' and the suggestion that if you want to understand an organization the best thing to do is try to change it. According to Greenwood and Levin, these early action research experiments, together with the pioneering work of the Tavistock Institute in London after the war, showing how production technology and work organization are inextricably linked, strongly influenced the links between *action research* and social democracy in Scandinavia. Pioneering work with Volvo, Saab-Scania and Alfa Laval helped change our understanding of industrial organization away from rigid Taylorist approaches to work design, and toward the more flexible forms of semi-autonomous work organization with which we are more familiar today.

But the origins of action research do not rest only in Western social science. Another important influence has been *liberationist* movements particularly among underprivileged people of the South, where approaches to research, evaluation and education have been used as tools for social change. The argument here is that the creation of knowledge is in the hands of the rich and powerful elements of an increasingly global society, and works to enhance their interests against those of the disenfranchised majority world.

Selener (1997) traces the theoretical roots of what has come to be called *participatory action research* to liberationist writers such as Marx, Engels and Gramsci. Freire (1970) in particular has emphasized the importance of helping disadvantaged people develop critical thinking so that they could understand the ways in which they were disadvantaged by the political and economic conditions of their lives and could develop their own organized action in order to address these issues.

So participatory research has a double objective. One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people – through research, through adult education, and through sociopolitical action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: they 'see through' the ways in

which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members. This is the meaning of consciousness raising or *conscientization*, a term popularized by Freire for a 'process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection' (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991, p. 16). The tradition of participatory rural appraisal similarly is concerned with 'putting the first last' and creating practical knowledge of use to the underprivileged members of our world (Chambers 1997).

Other important influences on action research have been the *experiential learning* movement (Kolb 1984), *action learning* (Revans 1980), *humanistic psychology* (Heron 1992), popular education (Gaventa 1991), organization development (Shani 1985) and feminist thinking (Mies 1993, p. 61). A recent special issue of the journal *Management Learning* (Raelin 1999, p. 1560) contains articles exploring Action Research (Dickens and Watkins 1999), Participatory Research (Park 1999), Action Learning (Marsick and O'Neil 1999), Action Science (Putman 1999), Action Inquiry (Torbert 1999) and Cooperative Inquiry (Reason 1999). These are all contemporary forms of action-oriented research which place emphasis on a full integration of action and reflection, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied – as Torbert (1981) puts it, creating a form of knowledge useful to the actor and the point of action. They also place great importance on the democratic nature of the research process: as Greenwood and Levin emphasize, action research 'is fundamentally about the transformation of power relations in the direction of greater democracy' (Greenwood and Levin 1998, p. 88, see also Toulmin and Gustavsen 1996). This is first because democracy is of over-arching value in its own right, and second because inappropriate, authoritarian use of power in all societies, means that only a tiny fraction of knowledge and capacities are used to confront important problems. Thus contemporary forms of action research place great importance on collaboration between all those involved in the inquiry project, aiming to help the individual practitioner develop skills of reflective practice and organization and community members develop a culture of open inquiry as part of their work life, to develop learning organizations or communities of inquiry.

There are thus many ways of approaching action research and action learning, and in the rest of this chapter I offer one way of thinking about different approaches to action research which are based in our own work at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, and my collaboration with colleagues worldwide. More extended discussions of both theory and practice can be found by consulting the references cited (e.g Reason and Bradbury 2000).

### **Characteristics of action research practice**

I want to emphasize four important characteristics of action research which, I believe, distinguish it from more traditional forms of management research.

First, while the primary purpose of academic research is to contribute to an abstract 'body of knowledge' available to third-persons, it has long been argued that 'the findings in our scholarly management journals are only remotely related to the real world of practicing managers' (Susman 1978, p. 582). In contrast, the primary purpose of action research is to develop *practical knowing* embodied moment-to-moment action by the research practitioner, and the development of learning organizations – communities of inquiry rooted in communities of practice (Argyris and Schön 1974, 1996; Argyris et al. 1985; Senge 1990).

Second, as we have seen above, action research has a *collaborative intent*: a primary value of action research strategies is to increase people's involvement in the creation and application of knowledge about them and about their worlds. Fundamentally, if one accepts that human persons are agents who act in the world on the basis of their own sensemaking; and that human community involves mutual sensemaking and collective action, it is no longer possible to do research *on* persons. It is only possible to do research *with* persons, including them both in the questioning and sensemaking that inform the research, *and* in the action which is the focus of the research. Of course, this collaboration between persons is not something which can be produced by fiat, as it were: collaborative relationships emerge over time, and may require careful facilitation for them to emerge at all. In many ways we can say that the development of organizations and communities able to inquire into and learn from their experience is the primary purpose of all action research strategies, and as we have seen above, this is important as a fundamental expression of human rights (Payne 1791).

Third, while most forms of academic research separate the knower from what it is to be known, and conduct their research from a distance (through surveys and questionnaires, for example) action research is rooted in each participant's in-depth, critical and practical experience of the *situation* to be understood and acted in.

This leads to the fourth characteristic of action research, that truth is not solely a property of formal propositions, but is a human activity that must be managed for human purposes (Mitroff 1998) which leads action research practitioners to take into account many *different forms of knowing* – knowledge of our purposes as well of our ideas, knowledge that is based in intuition as well as the senses, knowledge expressed in aesthetic form such as story, poetry and visual arts as well as propositional language, and practical knowledge expressed in skill and competence. Table 14.1 shows a version of the extended epistemology based on the work of Heron and Reason (e.g. Heron 1971, 1992, 1996; Reason 1988, 1994, 1999; Reason and Heron 1995). Others, notably Park (1999) and Torbert (1991) use different descriptions with similar intentions.

Knowing will be more valid– richer, deeper, more true to life and more useful – if these four ways of knowing are congruent with each other: if our knowing is grounded in our experience, expressed through our stories and images, understood through theories which make sense to us, and expressed in worthwhile action in our lives.

**Table 14.1** Types of knowing in co-operative action learning

- *Experiential knowing* is through direct face-to-face encounter with person, place or thing; it is knowing through empathy and resonance, and is almost impossible to put into words.
- *Presentational knowing* emerges from experiential knowing, and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry and story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance and so on.
- *Propositional knowing* 'about' something, is knowing through ideas and theories, and is expressed in abstract language or mathematics.
- *Practical knowing* is knowing 'how to' do something and is expressed in a skill, knack or competence.

Source: After Heron (1971) and Reason (1988).

Finally, action research aims to develop theory which is not simply abstract and descriptive but is a guide to inquiry and action in present time. A good theory arises out of practical experience, articulates qualities of practice to which we aspire, and challenges us, moment to moment in our professional and personal lives, to discover ways to realize these qualities in action.

Thus we can highlight the radical shift between the basic aims of most managerial research and participatory action inquiry: the former aims at *universalizable, valid certainty in reflection about particular pre-designated questions*, participatory action inquiry aims at *timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action at all moments of living*.

## Strategies for action research and practice

We can identify three broad strategies of action research practice (Reason and Torbert in preparation, Torbert 1998):

- First-person action research/practice skills and methods address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting.
- Second-person action research/practice addresses our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern – for example in the service of improving our personal and professional practice both individually and separately. Second-person inquiry is also concerned with how to create communities of inquiry or learning organizations.
- Third-person research/practice aims to create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who, because they cannot be known to each other face-to-face (say, in a large, geographically dispersed corporation), have an impersonal quality.

Naturally, the fullest kind of action research will engage all three strategies: first-person research practice is best conducted in the company of friends and colleagues who can provide support and challenge; such a company is most likely to evolve into a second-person co-operative inquiry process. On the other hand, attempts at third-person research which are not based in rigorous first-person inquiry into one's purposes and practices is open to distortion through unregulated bias.

The following account from Bob Hudson shows how one manager's first-person research evolved to include immediate colleagues (second-person) and on into the wider organization (third-person). As CEO of an NHS Trust in Wales, Bob led his organization's response to the reorganization of the health service in Wales which challenges the independent existence of the Trust and with it his job as CEO.

The reaction from the Board down was to defend our position and to seek to build a power base that would enable us to survive as an independent organization. While this was my own initial position, I could also see that that competitive relationships between organizations were hindering the delivery of service.

My initial attempts to engage the Board in a constructive debate on these issues didn't go down too well – the concern was about winning in the merger process. Speaking widely with my colleagues over the following weeks I discovered a mixed range of concerns, from personal survival and a desire to defend the patch to anxieties about the implications for clinical services.

My response was to concentrate on the process of debate rather than the solution. I reasoned that we needed to surface within the Board the complexities of the issues and the range of views held if we were to collectively find a way forward. Our first attempt suggested that what we needed was an organization that looked like the one we had but was bigger! We had simply distorted our process to support the views we had brought to the meeting and there was a moment of collective recognition that this was what we had done. At a later session, using a process that forced us to articulate the assumptions we were using, we began to discuss openly the benefits of a range of merger models.

From this we engaged with the other organizations plus a wide range of other stakeholders. We did not propose a solution and seek to sell it to them, we sold a process on the basis that we might all learn something more ourselves. The final outcome was an agreement to the creation of a single Trust to replace the existing three – a solution that no one thought politically achievable at the outset. Support was not universal, the board of one trust continued to oppose the idea throughout but general stakeholder support was forthcoming and the idea survived.

There are a number of key points in this story for me:

- My own reflective practice was making me more open to different perspectives and more sensitive to reactions from organizational members to new thinking.

Mark Baldwin worked with groups of social workers to explore the tensions between professional discretion and bureaucratic procedures in the front-line implementation of social welfare policy. The groups were established following a day-long workshop at which these questions were identified, explored, and a shared commitment made to developing more effective practice. The groups met for a half-day session eight times over a six-month period. One group provides a good example of the approach: group members agreed to explore how they used one particular bureaucratic document – a consent form which was legally required but often not completed since, in the professional judgement of the social workers, it was inappropriate to do so because it would be threatening or oppressive to their clients. They agreed to reflect carefully about each instance when they did or did not complete this form, to keep notes on what they did, and to bring all this to each inquiry group meeting for collective reflection. In this way their own first-person inquiries were systematized and integrated with second-person inquiry within the group. As a result of these reflections over time they were able to understand much better the intuitive processes by which they reached decisions in their practice, and to develop practices of mutual reflection and support which provided much improved professional practice and managerial control over what was before an entirely uncontrolled activity. Not only did they learn about how to manage professional discretion within the team, they also began to incorporate the processes of co-operative inquiry into their team practices in a sustained fashion. (Baldwin 1998)

Bob Hudson extends his first-person inquiries into the second-person arena first by initiating reflective one-to-one conversations and then by creating workshop events at which his Board can reflect together about the challenges that face them.

### **Third-person action research/practice**

The practices of first- and second-person action research, while certainly challenging, are relatively well established: the inquiry processes an individual manager can undertake to develop his or her practice have been widely described and have been explored by probably thousands of managers and professionals worldwide; similarly well described and practised are the second-person processes a group of people may undertake, whether through co-operative inquiry, democratic dialogue, learning history and so on. One of the significant challenges for the field is how to develop third-person approaches to action research that engage large systems in democratic inquiry. Third-person research/practice attempts to create conditions which awaken and support the inquiring qualities of first- and second-person research/practice in a wider community, thus empowering participants to create their own knowing-in-action in collaboration with others.

For example, Toulmin and Gustavsen point to the major challenge of extending the relatively small-scale action research projects so that 'rather than being defined exclusively as "scientific happenings" they (are) also defined as

“political events” with links to a broader debate on industrial democracy’ (1996, p. 11). They have begun to experiment with ‘dialogue conferences’ which engage thousands of people in democratic dialogue on developmental tasks. Chisholm (1998) describes a large-scale action research to build network organizations in the New Baldwin Corridor, and a depressed region of Pennsylvania, which involves similar action research to engage with large and diverse communities of people. The Urban Health Partnership, located at the King’s Fund in London, has used ‘future search’ and similar conference designs (Weisbord 1992, p. 1159; Weisbord and Janoff 1995) to engage large numbers of people, drawn from different health care, social work and community organizations, in explorations to improve the care of elders in UK inner cities (Pratt 1999).

Bob Hudson and his colleagues move into a form of third-person research when they engage with other organizations and a wider group of stakeholders in the process of exploration which they have already started themselves. Note how important it is that they don’t seek to impose a solution, but to create a situation in which continuing dialogue can take place.

### **Integrating first-, second- and third-person action research/practice**

Third-person research represents in some ways the leading edge of action research practice: it presents us with the challenge of creating large-scale participative democracy and of dealing with some of the major issues which confront our societies – issues of scale, of co-ordination between different stakeholders and interest groups, of ‘joined-up government’ and so on. At the same time these large-scale enterprises demand attention to first- and second-person inquiry practices. For you cannot facilitate a large-scale inquiry conference unless you have developed a quality of inquiry in your own practice, so you exemplify inquiring behaviour and democratic dialogue, and are able to navigate the complex choices that such an event presents with a reasonable degree of comfort. You cannot do this unless you engage in mutual second-person inquiry with peers, friends prepared to truly support and challenge you, to engage with you on an in-depth journey of discovery. And of course, your first- and second-person inquiry will in many ways be fruitless unless at least in modest ways you are able to influence the wider third-person community to explore the issues that have engaged you. A third, very different example, will illustrate this.

Carlis Douglas started her PhD [Douglas 1999] inquiries with the intention of exploring the application of equal opportunities policies and practices in British organizations. As she reflected on the project she had undertaken, she realized over time that a more pressing question was how black professional women like herself could thrive, rather than simply survive in their organizational lives – a phrase she took as inspiration from the black woman poet Maya Angelou. Her first-person inquiry processes included writing reflective autobiography, careful recording and reflection on day-to-

day professional activities, and experimentation with novel forms of behaviour. For her second-person inquiry processes she established a small co-operative inquiry group of black women, and used her professional consulting practices to develop inquiring dialogue with black and white members of the organizations with which she worked, in particular in training programmes for black women managers. Her third-person inquiry processes were more tacit, but clearly involved increasing the amount of discussion and dialogue about issues of race and gender in the organizations she worked with, and influencing the development of policy and practice.

The inquiry processes were increasingly challenging. In her first person inquiries, Carlis noticed how the ways she had learned to survive which were quite typical of black women – working very hard, not raising issues of race and gender, shielding herself emotionally from racist incidents and putting them down to ignorance – were also ways in which she stopped herself from thriving – she overworked and made herself ill, and by shielding herself shut herself down emotionally, and so on. The second-person inquiries both supported this observation and challenged it – the group members found they behaved in similar ways, but also realized that they shared a strong norm which made it a taboo to talk about these aspects of their experiences *even between themselves as black professional women*. As one of the participants noted as they struggled with these issues, 'If we hadn't had this inquiry group we wouldn't have even known what kinds of questions to be asking!' The second-person inquiry provided a space to explore both these experiences and the taboo against discussion of them under conditions of high and developing mutual love and trust. This provided Carlis with a deeper understanding of the issues involved in raising these questions in the wider, second- to third-person discussions with black women managers, and provided her with a wider range of options of action in these difficult discussions.

As Greenwood and Levin point out, action research lies at the very centre of human life (1998, p. 90). Action research is a family of approaches through which we can work to develop democratic dialogue in the service of mutual understanding and more informed action. It is an approach to living based on experience and engagement, on love and respect for the integrity of oneself and others. It depends on our willingness to rise above presupposition, to look, and to look again, to try out different behaviours, to risk security in the search for understanding and appropriate forms of action. All this in the service of opening possibilities for creative living.

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