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AR as meta-research

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Abstract

Action research includes two broad sets of components. One set consists of the processes which generate the action outcomes. The processes for generating understanding (the "research") comprise the second. Each reinforces the other.

In much of the literature (though perhaps less so in practice) the two components are treated as if they are indissolubly linked. They can be treated separately. Many change processes other than action research are participative. Some practitioners use an action research cycle to research their own practice non-participatively.

In this paper I offer the view that some of the advantages of the research component of the action research cycle reside in its combination of rigour and flexibility.

After discussing those advantages I suggest that they allow all practitioners *including researchers* to research their own practice.

For example, researchers can use action research when the eventual methodology to be used is not yet known. Researchers can begin to engage with the research situation using action research. As their understanding of the situation grows they are better able to decide which methodology is most suitable.

In other words, action research can function as a process for meta-research.

Action research: action and research

Action research is action and research. Its spiral process equips it well for this dual purpose, allowing it to pursue outcomes of both action or change, and research or understanding, at the same time.

The spiral at its simplest is an alternation between action and critical reflection, usually done participatively. The critical reflection has two components: a review of what has just been done, noting what has been learned, and then planning how to apply this learning to the next step (Figure 1).

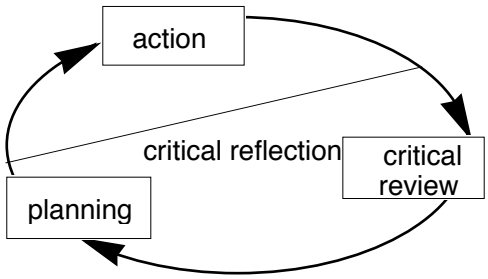

Figure 1. A version of the action research cycle

From the critical reflection comes the understanding, arising from and leading again to action. From the participation comes commitment to change. The combination — a participatory spiral of alternating action and reflection — allows action research to pursue informed action and relevant theory in the service of community and organisation development.

From the beginning a participatory approach has been an important part of the tradition.

Participation

If those affected by a change are involved in the change program then the action plans are likely to take that multiplicity of views into account. The understanding of the situation is likely to be a shared understanding. The participants will act with more enthusiasm when the shared understanding and the action plans are their own.

This is no small achievement. Here is a process which allows a group of people to monitor their moment-by-moment and day-by-day experience and turn it into committed action. Here is a process which acts on understanding, putting that understanding to an immediate test.

In addition participation offers users the ideological cachet of avoiding power relations and grand narratives. Responsive to the situation and the people, it allows the development of understanding which is local. It is therefore not surprising that much of the support in the literature for participation is framed in ideological terms.

Taking all this into account the strong support for participation in much of the action research literature is understandable. It is arguable that, used more widely in community development and organisation development, action research could do much to increase both the success of change programs and the understanding of change by those involved.

The centrality of participation in action research is well accepted. Lewin's initial approach was participatory. So are important traditions in both community development (for instance Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991) and organisation development (for instance French and Bell, 1998). Kemmis and McTaggart (e.g. 2000), influential authors in the field of educational action research, prefer action research which is emancipatory over other varieties. The editors of, and all or almost all of the contributors to, the recent *Handbook of action research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) assume that action research is participatory. This is despite the variety in their approach, their background, their nationality, and the settings they work in.

My own view is that participation is undervalued in much of the world of work and community and research. Even where it is supported, I think too little is written about how it can be done well.

That said, it also seems to me that one might reasonably choose a level of participation which suits the situation, the people, and the change and research outcomes. Participation can vary along a broad continuum. It makes sense to acknowledge this, and accept that its extent and nature can be a matter of choice. To do less is to limit choice needlessly.

In this paper I wish to go further than that. I want to suggest that for some purposes there are advantages in teasing apart the research component and the participatory component.

Action research as research

Intended for use in change programs, action research must achieve its rigour while being flexible and responsive to the research situation.

Many of its sources of rigour it shares with some other approaches. For instance, much action research is qualitative. Like much qualitative research it can draw on the benefits of triangulation. This can include the use of different views,

different methods for data collection and analysis, and different theoretical frameworks, as Fielding and Fielding (1986) among others have pointed out. Action research can share with almost all research a continuous and vigorous search for disconfirming evidence, as Popper (1965) influentially recommended.

Some sources of rigour, however, are almost unique to action research. Two of these are important to the theme of the present paper, and I discuss each of them in turn. They are its cyclic nature and its testing of assumptions in action.

Cycles within cycles

I've already described a simple form of the action research cycle — an alternation between action and critical reflection. Several authors offer more expanded descriptions. Some of these read as if they are intended to apply mainly to the overall shape of the action research project. The cycle is long-term.

For instance Rothwell, Sullivan and McLean (1995) diagram action research as consisting of entry, followed by a cycle of start-up, assessment and feedback, action planning, intervention and evaluation. These authors also compare their cycle to the "PDCA cycle" much used in quality management — plan, do (that is, trial the plan), check (the trial), act (that is, implement the plan fully).

Other descriptions can apply also to shorter cycles within the overall process. A typical version is that of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988): plan, act, observe, reflect. The similarity of this to the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) is no accident.

A cycle such as this can be applied over many different time frames. It can apply moment-by-moment. It can also be used within successively larger timeframes up to the entire project and beyond. This allows us to conceptualise action research as consisting of cycles within cycles within cycles ... A researcher can reflect critically on planned actions which take seconds, and others which take

hours, days, months or longer. Understanding therefore also develops over these multiple timeframes.

A later section explores the role of cyclic critical reflection in making tacit understanding explicit. First, though, I wish to address the presence of action within each cycle.

Action research: tested in action

It is time to explore in more depth the plan → act → review cycle. Looking in turn at each of the components:

- *plan* what is to be done next
- *act* to carry out the plan
- *review* the action and its consequences and identify what has been learned.

You will note that the learning is informed by previous action and its consequences, and informs subsequent action.

The learning will serve its purpose best if it takes the form of what Argyris and Schön (1974 and subsequently) call a "theory of action". For them such a theory has three components:

- the *situation* in which the action is to take place
- the *outcomes* which it is intended to achieve
- and the *actions* which are expected to achieve those outcomes.

A little reflection will show the importance to practitioners of this view of theory. These are the key components of theories which can be applied immediately in action. They enable a person to act in an informed manner. There is first a decision about the nature of the situation. The required outcomes are then identified. Finally, the actions which (it is believed) will deliver the outcomes can be devised (Figure 2).

When planning is done in such terms, the actions and plan can be compared easily. During the subsequent critical review within the same cycle the researchers can determine if the outcomes were achieved. If not, they can then attempt to determine if they were mistaken about the situation, or about the actions which would produce the desired outcomes.

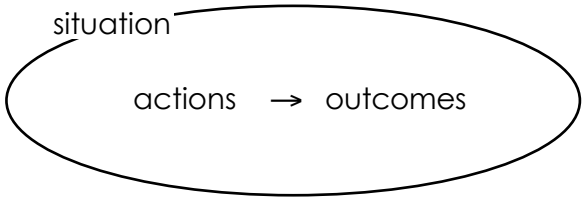

Figure 2. The components of a theory of action

Done regularly within each cycle over multiple time frames this offers a double advantage. It achieves a combination of rigour and flexibility. It increases the learning which can be drawn from experience.

The qualities of rigour and flexibility also open up many other research opportunities to practitioners, whatever the nature of their practice.

Practitioner research

At this point you may be thinking that action research sounds much like learning from experience. It seems to resemble what good practitioners do to improve their practice.

To some extent this is true. When the action research cycle is explained to practitioners, many of them respond that they "already do it". And indeed in an informal manner they do. They act at least some of the time with intention, and in the light of their experience they try to learn from their successes and failures.

We talk about some practitioners being "experienced". By this we mean that they know more than they learned during their official training. They know more than a novice does.

How did this come about? Mostly, I suspect, it comes about through trial and error. The practitioner tries something that she has "learned" in the past, perhaps in some formal course. Unexpectedly, it doesn't work. She then changes her practice until she find something that does work. At the same time she learns to recognise situations which will respond to her original learning and situations for which her new strategy is more appropriate.

Alternatively, the practitioner is confronted by a novel situation for which her training doesn't equip her. She then tries to find some way of dealing with the situation, perhaps using extended trial and error until something works. In most instances this critical reflection is less than action research recommends. It is neither as regular and systematic nor as critical.

I conclude from this that the research component of action research is an extension of what many practitioners do naturally. Action research is a natural form of research. However, it benefits from being more formalised than it is in the usual behaviour of many practitioners.

Researchers, too, are practitioners. This brings us to the conclusion to which this paper has been directed.

Meta-research

As researchers go about their research, they too learn from their experience. They reflect on the results of their research actions. They modify their research practice in the light of their experience. In other words they use an informal action research cycle to improve their research.

The implications are important for those researchers doing routine research, and also for those tentatively finding their way into a new research area. The likely gains are greatest, I would think, for the second of these. Using action research as meta-research, researchers can engage with a research situation before they know enough to choose a methodology. As they use action research their understanding of the situation grows. Eventually the point is reached where a choice of methodology becomes clearer.

There are hints of this use of action research already in the literature. Non-participative research is not as rare as much of the literature would indicate. There are approaches which might be regarded implicitly or explicitly as meta-research.

Its non-participative aspect, though clearly counter-cultural in the action research literature, is allowed by Clark (1972). Much teacher action research does not involve the students, though they are arguably important stakeholders in what happens in the classroom.

Checkland and Holwell (1998) describe research as a framework **F**, operationalised as a methodology **M**, directed towards an area of concern **A**. In the course of doing this the researcher learns about *and modifies* **F**, **M**, and **A**. Checkland and Holwell offer this description in a book on soft systems methodology, which they identify as an action research methodology.

The "first person research" advanced by Torbert (2001a; Reason and Torbert 2001), and now championed by Reason and Bradbury (2001) in their influential handbook, is similar. On his home page Torbert (2001b) defines it as "e.g. observing what I really want, what I am thinking, and what I am doing". (I should add that they strongly argue for action research as participative.)

As one might expect of meta-research, the promise is great. It can be expected to lead eventually to a greater understanding of research generally. It has the

potential to allow more informed choices about the particular methodology to research a particular situation.

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