

How I Became an Action Researcher (Action Scientist)

Victor J. Friedman, Ruppin Institute, Israel

While in high school, I decided to work in Arab-Jewish relations, so I majored in Arabic and Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University. In the summer of 1973, I participated in an Arabic language program in Tunis, where I visited the Jewish community on the island of Djerba, which traces its origins to refugees from the destruction of the First Jewish Commonwealth (586 B.C.E.). I was fascinated by this ancient community, which maintained its traditional way of life and which faced a future that was very much in doubt. I had a strong desire to learn about this community and to do something that would preserve its traditions.

In order to get back to Djerba, I applied for, and received, a Thomas Watson Fellowship. The Watson Fellowship funds creative post-undergraduate projects involving an international element. It is not a research grant and I was not required to produce anything other than periodic progress reports. From the moment I arrived, I kept a detailed journal of my observations, conversations, experiences, etc. Everywhere I turned there was something new, strange, and fascinating.

Yet, the more I experienced, the fuzzier things seemed to become. I quickly became aware of the huge gap between the project I had defined so clearly and the enormous complexity of the "reality" I was encountering in the field. I began to feel uneasy: Was I looking in the right direction? What should I focus on? How would everything add up?

I wrote to my former teachers at Brandeis, asking them what I should focus on, but not a single one provided me with a concrete answer. As time went on, I felt more and more confused and unsure of myself. Every time I tried to focus on an issue, I wondered whether it wasn't a dead end or whether there wasn't something more significant to be looked into. Feelings of doubt and frustration gnawed away at my self-confidence and morale (not to mention the feelings of being alone in the field). I left Djerba earlier than planned, feeling that I had failed.

This experience led me to reflect on the meanings of learning, knowledge, and formal education. Although I had loved school and was at the top of my class, I realized that my learning had been dependent both upon a high degree of structure imposed from without. I found myself quite lost when these structures were taken away and I had to carve knowledge from a complex reality. I also realized that I had confused academic success with "knowing". I had long been aware of a gap between what I really "knew" and my academic performance. Furthermore, I had often suspected that many of my teachers did not really "know" what they were talking about. Within the academic environment, it had been easy to ignore these doubts and to play a game of mutual-affirmation.

My Djerba experience awoke within me a number of guiding values/puzzles. The first was a preference for learning through experience and especially from engaging uncertainty/complexity. The second was a commitment to never being satisfied with learning until I felt that "really" knew what I was talking about. The third was to listen to my self and to trust my

own sense of what is important. I would add to these values a love of people and of learning in general.

These values were also puzzles, because I did not know how to enact them and it took me a long time to learn how to put them into practice. For me, the professional challenge has been to use my own learning as a way of helping others learn. These values have guided me in my journey through different work experiences, graduate school (where I was fortunate to have encountered Chris Argyris and Don Schon), and my practice as teacher-consultant-researcher. There have been, of course, many critical formative, experiences along the way, but I think that my “failure” in Djerba set me on the path towards action science.