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What is good action research?: Why the resurgent interest?

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**NOTE FROM
THE FIELD**

What is good action research?

Why the resurgent interest?

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Purpose

In the following ‘Note from the Field’, I respond to an invitation from students in the world of organizational studies, to share my perspective on what constitutes a good action research project/paper. As action researchers privilege the context of practice over disembodied theory, I will introduce examples of action research – after some initial definition and framing.

Definition

Action research is an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work *with* practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. We may therefore say that action research represents *a transformative orientation to knowledge creation in that action researchers seek to take knowledge production beyond the gate-keeping of professional knowledge makers.*

Action researchers do not readily separate understanding and action, rather we argue that only through action is legitimate understanding possible; theory without practice is not theory but speculation. Our activist wing

might summarize that action research takes knowledge creation to the people!

Many forms

I acknowledge that many elements of action research can appear confusing. The label itself is, in fact, an umbrella term that represents a ‘family’ of practices. Like all families that Tolstoy would have us bother with, action researchers argue and fall in and out with one another. Inside the family we see practices that seem genetically unrelated. After all, what could Chris Argyris’s combative investigation of learning defenses (‘action science’) have in common with Dave Cooperrider’s more gentle engagement (‘appreciative inquiry’)? Yet both are forms of action research. Moreover, there are confusing similarities with work outside the family.

Relation to qualitative research

Action research does bear resemblance to, and frequently draws from the methods of, qualitative research in that both are richly contextualized in the local knowledge of practitioners. However, qualita-

Qualitative research is research **about** practice, not **with** practitioners.

tive research is

Major Forms of Action Research

Chris Argyris' Action Science

Heron and Reason's Cooperative Inquiry

Paulo Freire's Participatory Action Research (PAR)

William Torbert's Developmental Action Inquiry

Jack Whitehead's and Jean McNiff's Living Theory approach

research *about* practice, not *with* practitioners. This crucial difference often leaves the work ‘inactionable’, that is, not something that practitioners can or even wish to make practical use of. Ultimately, the relationship with quantitative work depends on what is relevant to a particular project. Thus some of us are quite good at quantitative analysis too! Similarly, in its organizational manifestation, action research bears resemblance to business consulting.

Relation to business consulting

Indeed, some of the best organizational action researchers are also known to business leaders as consultants (and they are smart enough not to try to explain the

Consulting is work done **for** practitioners,

odd term ‘action research’ outside the scholarly-practitioner community). But again there is a simple but crucial difference. Consulting is work done *for* practitioners, that is, usually the elites who can pay to have their concerns addressed.

Action research, however, necessarily *stretches beyond* a consulting relationship, though it may overlap and can begin there, to engage more systematically with knowledge creation. Further, some may understandably confuse AR with applied research. But that too is different, generated as it is *about* practice and then offered by scholars for use *by* practitioners.

To reiterate, action research *with* practitioners *always includes* practitioners as partners in the work of knowledge creation.

Perception of action research

Action research is often said to have originated in the 1950s with the social-psychology work of Kurt Lewin, and is currently receiving resurgent interest especially in the fields of education, social work, international development, healthcare, etc., that is, the ‘helping’ professions.¹ In the organizational world it has become a fairly standard way of working for the increasing numbers of professional students who seek masters and doctoral credentials. Action research also lives more or less happily on the margins of conventional social science departments and does this despite its critique of the very values, assumptions and approaches that have grounded university research to date. It is tolerated more and less depending on the context. I think it fair to say that it is recognized as an important way of responding to the critique that conventional social science offers little of value to the people it studies. In professional schools this can be a devastating critique. As the cost of education increases we are bound to hear more of this critique, the type that deans take seriously. In this sense, action research offers an important *complement* to conventional social science.

Autobiographical note



Before I proceed to the promised examples, I offer first a little autobiography. Action researchers are, relative to conventional social scientists, more autobiographical in their expression (we call it reflexive). Because we acknowledge that all claims to knowledge are shaped by interests (consider that knowledge claims are never neutral), what may seem like autobiographical self-indulgence is offered to help contextualize the claims, create transparency and also to anchor ownership of expression that can otherwise masquerade as worryingly disembodied and neutral. We might say that reflexivity is

as much a part of explaining any project as is the conventional article's array of methodological and literature review statements at the outset of most articles.

Undergraduate and Masters work

My scholarly training at the undergraduate and masters levels was in the humanities, a world in which I encountered immense erudition and quietism. Had I wanted



simply to 'understand' the world better I would have remained at the University of Chicago where I was lucky enough to study with both Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur. My fellow students and I would quip, with an unreflexive self-satisfaction that in hindsight makes me cringe, that we ate 'hermeneutics for breakfast'. My thesis, written to advance to yet more studies, compared the categories of myth and critical rationality. Perhaps it was the careful footnoting from Foucault's

and Nietzsche's texts (from the originals mind you!) that allowed a slow dawning on me that I didn't wish to spend my life always at a distance from experience. I guess I wanted to live a little!

Exploring life



I withdrew from formal studies and went to study Zen in Japan. Zen practice encourages us to get deeply familiar with our own experience 'right here, right now'. It teaches that intellectual understanding is a distant second best. Returning after a year to the States, I landed a job working closely for a Texan oil billionaire, a context that attracted me for its seeming closeness to the main artery of big business – now that'd be really living! But despite living vicariously at the margins of eye-popping wealth and power, after two years I was drawn inexorably back to a scholarly setting.

Discovery of action research

An important moment was my discovery of Argyris et al.'s *Action Science*. I immediately saw in it a user friendly and actionable version of Habermas's theory of communicative action. This set me on a path toward getting involved with the work of organizational learning that flourished at that time around Cambridge, Massachusetts. From that I moved to formal organization studies. I count myself lucky that Boston College took me in, a place where the senior faculty (Jean

Bartunek, Richard Nielsen, William Torbert) were all familiar with, and indeed seasoned practitioners of, action research. At Boston College, my interest in action research was supported although most of the course work was aimed at gaining familiarity with the foundations of conventional organization science.

Academic career

Upon completion I started my academic career at Case Western Reserve, a place traditionally seen as also embracing the action paradigm. Against all ‘conventional’ advice early in my career I co-edited an encyclopedic *Handbook of Action Research* with Peter Reason, an English grandmaster of action research. The book managed to simultaneously allow the international community of AR to see ourselves and to feel pride in our collective accomplishments. The range was extraordinary – from helping create whole new states (Ernie Stringer’s work in East Timor) to reorienting policy on sustainable food production that affected millions of people in India and Latin America (Michel Pimbert’s work), to organizational learning that swept corporate life (Peter Senge). The *Handbook’s* relative success (not that we made the Oprah list) led to founding the international, peer reviewed journal *Action Research*, published by SAGE and considered one of the most successful new journals they have launched. So today I respond to the invitation to write an essay not as a distanced observer of the field but as an active leader.



My interests

My interests are in promulgating the action paradigm among and for those who, like me, yearn to contribute to making a positive difference. I admit there is a part that also wishes to respond to the dismissive disdain that hovers over academics’ conversations about action research. I understand that disdain, having myself once dismissed the entire empirical endeavor! But now located inside the community of social science, I too feel disdain for work labeled action research that is in fact some amalgam of uncritical consulting that leads to the reification of power relations in organizations and, oops, somehow forgets that contribution to theory and practice is also required. In the following I hope my concern for the quality of work shared under the label ‘action research’ is evident. My intention here is not so much to invite a thousand flowers to bloom, but to suggest that action research must be nurtured by those involved especially in preparing graduate students for life after their degree.

Core features of action research

I'll quote from what is called the 'Manifesto on Transformation of Knowledge Creation', signed by all 60 advisory editors of *Action Research* journal and available on the SAGE ARJ website. We begin:

Action researchers see our work as providing models for increasing the relevance of conventional social research to wider society. What makes our work fundamental to the revitalization of social research more generally lies in its orientation towards taking action, its reflexivity, the significance of its impacts and that it evolves from partnership and participation.

By *partnership and participation* we are referring to the quality of the relationships we form with primary stakeholders and the extent to which all stakeholders are appropriately involved in the design and assessment of inquiry and change. By *actionable* we refer to the extent to which work provides new ideas that guide action in response to need as well as our concern with developing action research crafts of practice in their own terms. By *reflexive* we mean the extent to which the self is acknowledged as an instrument of change among change agents and our partner stakeholders. By *significant* we mean having meaning and relevance beyond an immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology.

In sum then the core features of action research are that the work happens in the context of action and we have to get into an organization and be engaged with the practitioners there. It operates in partnership with practitioners and we need to discuss and shape our research question and design with the practitioners. Not only must practitioners see the value of working with us, they must want to engage in the experiment in learning that is action research. Action researchers plan for cycles of action and reflection and thereby must be *reflexive* about how change efforts are unfolding, and the impact that our presence (the intervention) is having. We must be acquainted with the practices of action research which are numerous and varied, and remain interested in always strengthening a skill set for designing/leading workshops that invite knowledge creation with practitioners.

Technical, practical and emancipatory aims of action research

Working in partnership with practitioners pretty much ensures the practical aims will be met – otherwise they won't waste their time. Moreover, as scholars we are also called to make sure that technical aims are met – of particular importance here is the question of how to ensure quality of the work, which I discuss in more detail below. The emancipatory aim, however, is often the trickiest and the most alluring to scholars. It may manifest in many ways. In oppressive contexts, it

may take the form of empowering those with little voice through including those who have been disappeared from a social system. In more familiar organizational inquiry, it may mean empowering employees as members of knowledge creation efforts that will inform their efforts to take the work forward, thus leaving them stronger.

The action researcher must develop facility in communicating with two audiences:

- the 'local' practitioners;
- and the 'cosmopolitan' community of scholars.

The latter is motivated by the question of what, if anything, can be contributed to what scholars already know. Academic colleagues privilege the written medium exclusively. The local audience, however, is not served by an early draft of the manuscript intended for scholarly peers! Communications with practitioners will be dictated by the professional or cultural expectations of the practitioners. As a rule of thumb, I find that practitioners are more readily engaged by story and multimedia reports to which their reaction may then be invited. Generally speaking, one must communicate with the local community first, using this as an opportunity for validating and disseminating local learning.

In some early public musings on what constitutes quality in action research, I suggested that quality:

- 1 proceeds from a praxis of participation,
- 2 is guided by practitioners' concerns for practicality,
- 3 is inclusive of stakeholders' ways of knowing,
- 4 and helps to build capacity for ongoing change efforts.

Because doing all that is very time consuming, I also suggested that people should not waste their time on trifling matters but instead, 5) choose to engage with those issues people might consider significant for, in the language of my colleague Peter Reason – 'the flourishing of people, their communities and the broader ecology'. Being value neutral is not a pretense action researchers uphold!

Three examples of action research

So what might all this mean in practice with regard to creating a project and writing a paper? Next I (finally!) sketch those examples I promised. My selection is based on what I happen to have been teaching this week. I am hoping that this mix, from *Action Research* journal, a successfully defended dissertation and an article from *Administrative Science Quarterly*, helps highlight the types of work that readers may identify with. Following the brief expositions, I will introduce the seven criteria for quality in action research endeavors that the associate

Example 1 Urban policy in Hong Kong (ARJ)

Background: Jackie Yan-chi Kwok and Hok-Bun Ku write as scholars of policy and development in Hong Kong.

Goal: The goal of their study was to help marginalized women become participants in urban planning.

Research practice: First, they gathered a group of immigrant women and children from one of the high density locations on the island. They asked them to take photos of their everyday life that represented the issues they wished addressed by new policy. Gathering the group back together for a workshop there was dialogue about the photos and images of overcrowding naturally were quite provocative.

Collaborative action: A three-dimensional planning kit to scale was then made available to help turn good ideas into concretely actionable planning decisions on how to get more sunshine and play spaces for their children. Together with social workers, they disseminated the new plans via radio and news publications. The Housing authority followed up further to invite participative assessment of public housing and invited advice on how to improve existing housing stock.

Results: The intervention produced practical improvements. More sustainably, it also produced insights on how to lessen social distancing between policy makers and those affected by allowing for cycles of input and feedback.

Example 2 LowcarbonWorks (dissertation)

Background: The recently completed dissertation of Margaret Gearty at the University of Bath emerges from the context of a project called 'LowcarbonWorks'. The interdisciplinary project, convened by the university and supported by government grants, brings engineers, social scientists and organizational leaders together.²

Goal: Their goal is to better understand the impediments to organizational embrace of low carbon technologies and to experiment to overcome them. Gearty and her organizational studies colleagues, frame their effort as a way to understand and encourage change amid the complex interlock of human, organizational and systemic factors that hold the status quo in place.

Research practice: The project convenes regular meetings of its scholarly and practitioner stakeholders as well as new business leaders who can attend.

Collaborative action: Gearty both contributes content to the conferences in the form of 'learning histories' (an action research practice) and then also uses the conferences as sites for validation and dissemination of the content of those learning histories. The learning history practice uses the rules and methods of qualitative research to tell a jointly told tale of researchers' and practitioners' learning efforts. In bringing the practitioners together, Gearty can disconfirm/validate the 'tales', in that the conference affords a deeper dive into discussions of what really was important for their organization in making change. In having newcomers listen to these learning oriented conversations, dissemination of learning also occurs.

Results: In effect, Gearty's dissertation both generated the learning histories and documented the effects of this method of disseminating learning among six different organizations. The very creativity of the conference and the beautifully designed learning history reports (with video) represent the project's overall embrace of new forms of learning history that can engage learning across multi-organizational boundaries.

Example 3 Toward a sociology of work time (in ASQ)

Background: Leslie Perlow's work is entitled 'The time famine: Toward a sociology of work time'.

Research practice: She documents her work with engineers to both understand how time is managed and also to help them innovate with time management.

Collaborative action: As a result of the collaboration, the engineers began to experiment with preserving part of their day without interruption.

Results: This led to their agreeing to no longer allow spontaneous drop in meetings (which required organization level agreement) or to take phone calls. The experiment proved helpful to the engineers and afforded Perlow a deeper understanding of time in the workplace.

editors of *ARJ* have articulated for our work with reviewers. I believe they can also serve as a checklist for quality with regard to any action research project proposals/dissertations and papers.

Action Research journal criteria

In combination, the following seven criteria, often called 'choicepoints' for quality, represent the elements of an action research project/paper that I and my colleagues in the *Action Research* journal look for. I will unpack each criterion with reference to the examples offered above. These are detailed in Table 1.

A note of caution: as in the examples described, it is rare that any one piece of work successfully responds to all choicepoints equally. If there is a rule in action research on the creation of quality, it is to be transparent about the choicepoints we make and about the limitations that come as a result of these choices.

Misconceptions of action research

If all the above responds to the question 'what is good action research?', I want to also add some thoughts on what isn't action research. There are three common misconceptions. Let's call the first the 'I intend to show my results to the CEO – that's action research' misconception. But, ahem, no it isn't! Keeping it 'at-a-distance' and interacting only with formal power holders isn't action research. Action research emerges from working with practitioners, hence the core emphasis on 'partnership and participation'.

Then there is the 'I shared my findings with someone in the organization, all will now be well' misconception. Simply offering one's insights is not action

Table 1 Criteria and examples

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Description from examples</i>
Articulation of objectives	<p data-bbox="362 248 1044 301"><i>The extent to which authors explicitly address the objectives they believe relevant to their work and the choices they have made in meeting those.</i></p> <p data-bbox="362 313 1044 366">Kwok & Ku aim to inform policy and empower marginalized immigrant women.</p> <p data-bbox="362 379 1044 432">Gearty aims to both document and enhance change efforts with regard to uptakes of low carbon technology.</p> <p data-bbox="362 444 1044 530">Perlow aims at creating a sociology of time in the workplace, seeing the intervention as a necessary component to allow her access and a deeper understanding of the engineers' use of time at work.</p>
Partnership and participation	<p data-bbox="362 566 1047 672"><i>The extent to and means by which the project reflects or enacts participative values and concern for the relational component of research. By the extent of participation we are referring to a continuum from consultation with stakeholders to stakeholders as full co-researchers.</i></p> <p data-bbox="362 689 1044 857">Kwok & Ku convene interaction among immigrant women, social workers, policy-makers and media. The women are given cameras to document their lives. The former are invited to a workshop that includes a scaled urban planning kit to inform policy-making. Extensive relationship and trust building happens as a prerequisite to change in policy-making.</p> <p data-bbox="362 874 1044 1157">Gearty engages organizational leaders in reflective interviews about why they took up new CO₂-reducing technology. She then shares these tales in a variety of media (including written but also video format) that are interesting to the practitioners themselves and their peers. She invites them into conversation that reflects on the tales she has woven about their work. This conversation, in the context of conferences, has the effect of validating/disconfirming and disseminating the learning. The validated copies are the made available while those wishing to newly engage with the work enter into the ongoing cycles of the learning history process.</p> <p data-bbox="362 1174 1044 1402">Perlow's study is part of a larger action research project led by senior scholar colleagues Rappoport and Bailyn. Their work engages software engineers in what at first is primarily an ethnographic study that documents how engineers use their time. The work has multiple agendas, hers primarily to understand how time is used, the engineers' primarily to develop more effective time management practices. The multiple agendas are therefore 'integrated in a collaborative action research agenda'.</p>

continues

Table 1 cont.

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Description from examples</i>
Contribution to action research theory/practice	<p><i>The extent to which the project builds on (creates explicit links with) or contributes to a wider body of practice knowledge and or theory, that contributes to the action research literature.</i></p> <p>Kwok & Ku contribute to our knowledge of the practice of 'photovoice' and experiential workshops, while also developing insight on how to craft policy.</p> <p>Gearty's work helps generate insight on the social dimensions of new technology which in turn informs our theory of technology adoption.</p> <p>Perlow's study does little to advance theory or practice of action research specifically.</p>
Methods and process	<p><i>The extent to which the action research methods and process are articulated and clarified.</i></p> <p>The written products of all the efforts (journal articles and a dissertation, respectively) clearly articulate what was done to whom so that the reader can see the choices to enhance quality that were made.</p>
Actionability	<p><i>The extent to which the project provides new ideas that guide action in response to need.</i></p> <p>In all efforts the work engaged change agents, rather than merely informing them. In effect action is an intrinsic part of the participation of change agents.</p>
Reflexivity	<p><i>The extent to which the authors explicitly locate themselves as change agents.</i></p> <p>Kwok & Ku reflect mostly on the power dynamics of the unusual context created for the work.</p> <p>Gearty narrates a personal journey of learning alongside the practitioners, making her assumptions transparent.</p> <p>Perlow's work shows the high degree of reflexivity associated with the work of ethnography. She clearly delineates the differing scholarly vs practitioner agendas.</p>
Significance	<p><i>The extent to which the insights in the manuscript are significant in content and process. By significant we mean having meaning and relevance beyond their immediate context in support of the flourishing of persons, communities, and the wider ecology.</i></p> <p>All work effected positive local change. The reach of the work is largest when the action research agenda is taken to be a central focus for those involved.</p>

research. Consider for a moment when and how practitioners do engage with actionable knowledge – isn't it more often through personal experiential learning? Experiential learning can be usefully shaped by vicarious or substitute experience in association with (in partnership with!) a researcher who is close to the practitioner in their context of practice. It is naïve to believe there will be genuine interest in your work among practitioners who have been treated as an afterthought.

And let's not politely overlook the 'Action research work is just sloppy social science' misconception. It helps to admit that there is sloppy conventional and sloppy action research. Calling sloppy conventional work 'action research' is unfair. Based on the definitions above, and in much more detail elsewhere, I hope such a mistaken identity can be unmasked. Beyond that however – let's imagine that a piece of action research is indeed well done – we must also acknowledge that confusion and disdain will always arise when we insistently evaluate one paradigm using the standards of the other. In simple terms we cannot compare apples and oranges, or, more properly as we are reflecting on paradigmatic difference, we cannot compare apples and blue.



Moving beyond misconceptions

What the first two misconceptions have in common is that there is a 'keep-practitioners-at-a-distance' way of operating. This is very understandable. The practice of participation is perhaps simply too unfamiliar or for many unrepentant introverts, too anxiety provoking. For all of us, it's quite exhausting. Yet many action researchers would say that we feel less alone, more integrated, and more clear about the competence of other people in the midst of challenging moments in AR where we do not have to be the 'be all-know all' arbiter.

More good news is that participation/partnership is not an all or nothing arrangement. Consider practitioner engagement as happening along a spectrum. On one end there is the 'as minimum as necessary consultation with the practitioners to have them be engaged with your work' position, which essentially means you have practitioners' perspective on all important matters. On the other end is bringing practitioners on as 'co-researchers' who co-design the work and may take it in new directions.

We are seeing increasing numbers of people experimenting, for example, many hitherto conventional social scientists in the healthcare domain are seeking to be more participative with healthcare consumers; they are using AR practices to respond to the demands of managing chronic illness. This type of work is

increasing because it is being financed by government grants (e.g. the US National Institute of Health) because strikingly better results have emerged from studies using participative approaches to chronic healthcare challenges. Based in my own experience and what I hear from colleagues, attaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is no more time consuming for action researchers, than for our conventional colleagues. However, be warned, most IRB administrative personnel are trained as 'very conventional' social scientists. It is important to educate them about the participative dimension and seek their advice early on how to proceed.

There is also a deeper problem with participation that confounds all of us trained to (at least appear to) be 'very right'. The typical default position of the human ego is to want to appear as a smart expert. Balancing our expertise driven advocacy with an inquiry mode with practitioners is really quite difficult. Perhaps contrary to commonsense, the more skillful we become, the more the insider-practitioners may be invited to control the action research. As a consequence, some of the most scholar-outsider controlled action research is inevitably part of the early work of a scholar, for example, the dissertation. With appropriate mentoring it is always possible to do high quality AR in the context of dissertation work. If the budding action researcher can take it further – we might think of Dreyfus and Dreyfus's distinction between novice, journeyman and expert as relevant here – deeper levels of partnership become possible over time.

More generally, and especially with regard to the third misconception, we must appreciate what each paradigm seeks to offer. The quality of most conventional social science looks very pale indeed when we inquire as to its actionability and reflexivity. And, yes, most action research looks rather pale when we ask about its generalizability. My response to the valid criticism about generalizability (emanating as it does from a concern for conventional validity), is to draw attention to the growing accumulation of local knowledge. Others (such as Numagami) have noted that seeking generalizability may be asking too much of *any* local knowledge/case study work. However, I'd also suggest that if more local knowledge can be shared through peer review mechanism, a new stock of knowledge becomes available to all and the possibility of transferability of knowledge may also grow.

Seeking to increase the generalizability of action research jeopardizes the partnership with practitioners. However, we can also imagine the work extending through time. Action researchers can do more to develop post-intervention insights by articulating propositions based on the partnership phase. In this way the complementarity of the paradigms may be developed in active partnerships between action and conventional researchers.

The paucity of partnerships between conventional and action researchers leads me to wonder if there isn't a deeper resistance to action research that is shaped primarily by a desire not to question the current status or the reward

systems that keep it in place. Those who determine the rewards of the academy today insist that publication in a handful (or two) of journals alone determines whether a scholarly career has merit. Those socialized to produce these articles are unlikely to appreciate work that is not primarily aimed at publication. If I have a request around this delicate matter, it's that we each consider what can be learned *with* each other. In working with an action researcher, a conventional social scientist can learn to offer more useful contributions in a variety of genres and venues.

'What is action research?' A doctoral student perspective

Could a self-respecting action researcher deliver an essay on doing good action research without talking it through with others? In writing this essay I was with a group of professional doctoral students at a quarterly residency. I was helping them prepare for their 'Advanced Action Research Practicum' next month in Beijing. The students had taken an introduction to action research a year previously and then studied qualitative and quantitative methods. Jeffrey Couch of the Institute for Advanced Studies at Colorado Technical University was kind enough to contribute some thoughts on how action research fits into his program.

Jeff writes:

Before even looking at the 'what' of action research, I first ask why is it that I received no exposure to AR whatsoever before my doctoral studies? Students of AR usually reach some measure of academic maturity before being exposed to theory and practice of AR. As a consequence of having been trained to know rather than to discover together, many students simply cannot integrate the emphasis on co-inquiry. Also, as both qualitative and quantitative methods augment and help develop results of AR inquiry, the timing of when to develop adequate skills in research methods is important. Even as a novice with AR I can see the artistry needed when conducting a good AR project. Approaching an inquiry as a subject matter expert (which is what my qual/quant methods classes assume), rather than as part of a shared process of inquiry, leads more often to a missed opportunity to participate in a liberating process with those usually considered instrumental but otherwise marginal to conventional research.

So, the real question may be 'why not' do AR?! Creating conditions for partnership, which is one of the main elements of AR, seems to help generate a sense of connection that better ensures benefit of the collective good.

Looking then through the lens of critical theory, which is concerned with empowerment and transformation, I experience the study and practice of AR in the interplay of the classroom and project site, as itself also moving the professor (as learning facilitator) and students (as learning participants) toward emancipatory education. This puts utopian ideas of praxis and the dialectics of knowledge creation – what Freire called 'problem-posing education' and what Dewey and Kolb call 'experiential learning' – into the learning experience. Therefore by learning AR, we are taking

critical thinking right into the core of our education. We are letting go the ‘banking’ concept of education described by Freire, in which knowledge is transferred through lecture and stored for possible resurrection some day that too rarely ever comes.

Thank you Jeff!

Action research: Enhancing scholarly and scholarly-practitioner partnership

I suspect that the reception of action research is where reception of qualitative methods was a decade or so ago. Where once action research complemented the positivist procedures of conventional social science (Kurt Lewin, often named a father of action research, was a great hypothesis tester), these days action research has more fully embraced the communicative/linguistic turn. Habermas seems to reign supreme as a legitimator of the more pragmatic and dialogue oriented philosophy and practice that now dominates action research. This philosophically pragmatist foundation (acknowledging that truth lies in what has demonstrable actionability) is what engenders the practical outcomes so needed by practitioners. Happy coincidence.

Recommended reading: I’d suggest that all doctoral students be better exposed to the action research paradigm. I recommend the textbook *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*, by Kathryn G. Herr and Gary L. Anderson (SAGE, 2005) as a start.

As one who advises professional doctoral students, I find variations on two simple questions to be good ways to help. For the ones who can’t (or are too timid) to engage in partnership with practitioners whose context they wish to study, I simply ask ‘what difference would you have your work make?/where is the action in your research?’ For those overcome by the context and too deeply engaged in making what can only amount to a momentary contribution, I ask ‘where is the research in your action’. In helping students to design their proposals, I encourage the articulation of an actionable question. I encourage students to get stuck into conversation with the key stakeholders as soon as possible and I encourage stakeholders to give input during the project proposal design phase. Ambitious projects may indeed be undertaken with temerity as long as the student can carve out a component that allows for timely dissertation completion, as Margaret Gearty (and many of us!) have shown is possible.

What about getting a job? What about publishing?!

Many students who take up the action paradigm do so as professionals who are also students, that is, they are not looking for an academic position. For those

feeling the pull to a more scholarly career, I'd say notice that jobs on the tenure track are increasingly scarce, a fact that few see reversing any time soon. With that in mind it's important to reiterate that the action paradigm is best seen as a complement, not a replacement in our social science endeavors. Education in how to do quality action research would create *more* not fewer options. While I believe that not all students have the multidimensionality to be effective action researchers, let us simply allow students to find their own niche. Therefore, to find a place to offer one's contribution requires exposure also to action research.

For those looking for a life that integrates scholarship *and* impact, awareness of the action paradigm may, in fact, open up creative alternatives. There are an increasing number of jobs for those who would work in executive and professional advanced degree programs. It is up to universities and the reward systems they design to make these positions as attractive to talented action researchers as tenure track has been. It is also possible, some say likely, that universities may prefer to go the 'Wal-Mart' route and increase the numbers of badly paid adjuncts doing much of the hard work in support of a feudal elite. In all likelihood both will happen and the education market will determine which model will be ethically and financially sustainable.

Happily, I also experience that the academic market has changed in the past decade. Whereas before it was either tenure track or demoralizing positions one took while awaiting a TT opening, today there are more creative tracks for people called to a scholarly, yet also practice-friendly, vocation. These innovations include the creation of new clinical and teaching tracks that require practitioner friendly communication skills. Some of these tracks are indeed designed to accommodate an academic second class citizenry to be treated as teaching workhorses. Yet in many, especially well resourced schools, the new tracks have begun to offer attractive pay, long-term contracts and respect from conventional colleagues. Their success is in no small part a result of their ability to support the school (or department) in engendering more credibility with salient stakeholders/practitioners (donors!). Importantly, these tracks, and those yet to be created, offer conditions for doing interesting and useful work in professionally supportive contexts. The best of these tracks are also beginning to create conditions for partnership between conventional scholars and scholar practitioners. These partnerships can advance both the scholarly *and* practitioner impact of a department, school, research center or an entire university.

As for publishing . . .

For those who look for worthy journals beyond the top five A-ranked journals usually referred to in doctoral preparation, they will find a multitude of vehicles for sharing what they have to say. An important benefit is that people actually

read these journals (you are reading one now!). It would seem that when junior faculty do the simple math of how many of their peers are vying to place articles in the tiny number of available slots in 'hit' journals, they may also consider a Plan B so that their intellectual effort may be better spent on other, potentially more society enhancing endeavors.

A parting reflection . . .

I conclude by sharing what has motivated me over the years. In a world so deeply in need of change (as I write I note with incredible sadness that all living systems are in decline – if that is not a compelling cause for coordinating collective action, I don't know what can be), I see that the brilliance of social scientists can be put to work in helping bring about needed change. I see the university as especially important for the potential to convene stakeholders for change in ways that overcome jurisdictional fragmentation. I have therefore come to think of action research as residing in the space that can integrate truth and power. The benefit for all involved in scholarly work is that deeper engagement with practice will revitalize social science and increase its relevance to the very issues that most deserve our attention.

Notes

- 1 In fact action research also has important roots, especially in the Southern Hemisphere, in the liberationist work of Marx and Freire. Moreover, there is debate about who actually coined the term, John Collier or Kurt Lewin.
- 2 More about the larger project may be found in Reason, P., Coleman, G., Ballard, D., Williams, M., Gearty, M., Bond, C., et al. (2009). *Insider Voices: Human dimensions of low carbon technology*. Bath: Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, University of Bath. Available at <http://go.bath.ac.uk/insidervoices>

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