Research Design:

Creating a Wider Audience for Action Research: Learning from Case-Study Research

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Abstract

Drawing upon the literature on action research and case-study research, this paper discusses similarities and differences between these two forms of research practice. The paper also highlights some of the criticisms and challenges action researchers face. It suggests ways in which action researchers may enhance the discussability of action research by: (a) increasing the transparency of their research processes, (b) declaring the intellectual frameworks brought into action research projects, (c) discussing transferability of findings, and (d) defining accumulation of results. This may require an extension to scientific discourse. In particular, the paper suggests that action researchers could change the ways in which action research results are reported to increase their reach among a wider audience.

Suggested Citation: Blichfeldt, B. S., & Andersen, J. R. (2006). Creating a wider audience for action research: Learning from case-study research. *Journal of Research Practice, 2*(1), Article D2. Retrieved [date of access], from http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/23/69

1. Introduction

Confronted with diverse formulations of research, we social scientists lack a mutually agreed set of criteria for judging the quality of research. We face challenges in dealing

with "complex social systems [that] cannot be reduced for meaningful study" (Baskerville & Lee, 1999, p. 52). Because the investigation of such systems cannot be reduced to tests of causal, universal relationships between elements, because context is crucial, and because the researcher may not be a value-free observer, social science often cannot follow the approach of natural science. In response to these challenges, social scientists rely on interpretive (often qualitative) research. Methods, which facilitate detailed inquiry into unique social situations, such as grounded theory, clinical inquiry, case studies, and action research, offer social scientists the opportunity to gain insight into social phenomena.

Among the above-mentioned methods, action research is said to be especially suited to study change processes in social contexts. However, given the highly contingent and context-dependent nature of such change processes, action research usually tends to deviate from the common research practice. This paper reflects on the contexts in which action researchers find themselves, in order to suggest how action research might become better integrated into research practice.

2. Aim and Scope

Action research can be traced back to Lewin's work (1946, 1947, 1948). Lewin was primarily concerned with the shortcomings of methods inherited from the natural sciences when such methods are applied to social sciences (Larsson, 2001). In particular, Lewin was not content with the limitations of studying complex social events in a laboratory as the strategy of splitting out single behavioural elements from an integrated system is problematic (Foster, 1972). Also, Lewin (1946) conceived action research as a way in which researchers could bridge the gap between practice and theory (Cunningham, 1993; Dickens & Watkins, 1999). He sought to develop theories appropriate for real world problem solving. Lewin emphasised *change* and *investigation of change* (Hendry, 1996) as key contributions of action research. According to Lewin, emphasising action (facilitating change) enables researchers not only to suggest appropriate lines of action, but also to investigate the actual effects of such actions. One feature that characterises Lewin's "classical action research model" is reliance on the traditional paradigm of experimental manipulation and observation of effects on the object (i.e., system) (Clark, 1972). Thus, the classical model of action research draws on researchers' wishes to maximise "scores" on the "realism desideratum" (Brinberg & McGrath, 1985) whilst trying to score highly on the desideratum "precision" (i.e., the desideratum regarding the ability to establish causal relations between actions and their effects, and thus, the desideratum traditionally affiliated with classical experiments). Contemporary action research approaches have expanded the action research continuum to range "from more traditional, consultant-directed, linear applications toward increasingly collaborative, systemic, transformational change processes" (Newman & Fitzgerald, 2001, p. 37). Nonetheless, across the entire spectrum of action research, the notion of change still occupies a prominent position. Thus, action research is a means to investigate changes and their effects while overcoming researchers' "self-imposed distance from the world of action" (Dash, 1999, p. 479).

Even though action research emerged about 60 years ago, action researchers are still faced with the issue of the scientific status of their trade (e.g., Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Although several years have passed since Foster (1972, p. 533) argued that "the literature on action research is not overburdened with attempts to distinguish between it and other forms of applied social research," this is still an issue that action researchers face. Also, although action research is increasingly recognised as a viable research strategy (especially in areas such as health care, information systems, and organisational development), "much of this, of course, happens outside the published literature and therefore outside the public and academic eye" (Dick, 2003, p. 258). Grønhaug and Olsson (1999, p. 13) argue that "there are actually only a few action researchers which have made major contributions to the scientific community."

Within the social sciences, the case study method, on the other hand, seems to have successfully positioned itself to a greater extent than action research. This paper suggests that action researchers can draw upon the case-study approach in order to enhance the acceptability of action research as a form of research. Specifically, we discuss the following: (a) similarities and differences between case study and action research, (b) the principal tenets of action research and the issue of its acceptability as a form of research, and (c) ways in which action researchers may improve the acceptability of their work as a form of research.

3. Similarities between Case Study and Action Research

Both case study and action research are generic terms covering many forms of research. Diversity in theory and practice characterises both. Case-study research embraces varieties which could exemplify *inductive* and *deductive*, or *positivistic* and *interpretive* forms of research (Caveye, 1996). There seems to be a "case-study continuum" ranging from Yin's (1989) *hypothetico-deductive* design to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) notion of *grounded theory* (Blichfeldt, 2004). The continuum of case research covers both *post-modern* and *realist* perspectives (Dobson, 2001). Likewise, action research also embraces a range of perspectives and research designs, for example positivistic experimental designs and more interventionist designs aiming at facilitated learning among participants.

Both case-study research and action research are concerned with the researcher's gaining an in-depth understanding of particular phenomena in real-world settings. The two types of research seem quite similar in their focus on the field or the world of action, while embracing considerable diversity in theory and practice. Several authors argue that action research should rely on the case-study method (e.g., Cunningham, 1993). Also, many action researchers adopt the specific guidelines for doing research which the proponents of case-study research offer.

4. Differences between Action Research and Case Study

Although both case-study research and action research deal with context-bound knowledge, action research offers a greater role to the participants in defining the issues to be addressed. In the words of Argyris and Schön (1991, p. 86), "action research takes its cues--its questions, puzzles, and problems--from the perceptions of practitioners within particular, local practice contexts."

Mostly, a case study begins with the researcher's interest in a particular set of phenomena, whereas an action research project begins mostly with the issues and concerns within some practical situation, with which the action researcher interacts. Thus, action researchers are confronted with the dilemma inherent in doing research that should both answer a research question *and* fulfil a practical need (Rapoport, 1970). Therefore, action research is characterised by "the active and deliberate self-involvement of the researcher in the context of his/her investigation" (McKay & Marshall, 2001, p. 49). On the other hand, case researchers mostly draw on the participants in order to investigate phenomena specified by the researcher prior to doing the study. Consequently, collaboration between the researcher and the participants seems more critical to the success of an action research endeavour than it is for case-study research, which relies more on the participants as sources of evidence. Baskerville and Lee (1999, p. 18) suggest that collaboration (a) diminishes action researchers' ability to control processes and outcomes as well as their freedom to pick and choose problems and (b) reduces possibilities for ending an action research project if focus changes during the process.

A further difference between action research and case study relates to researchers' stance on how and to whom they disseminate their results. Although case researchers sometimes take it upon themselves to disseminate their findings to those who participated in the study, the findings are primarily targeted at the academic community. On the other hand, action researchers have an obligation to feed data back into the community with which they collaborated when identifying and solving a practical problem. In privileging on one set of target audience, researchers sometimes neglect the other relevant audiences. This has led to observation such as this one: "action researchers 'have forgotten' to report in detail their research activities and how they have arrived 'step-by-step' at their interpretations and actions, which usually means that the knowledge creation of action research is partially neglected in the literature" (Grønhaug & Olsson, 1999, p. 13).

Another issue that discriminates between case research and action research is that action researchers, to a greater extent, do not declare and discuss intellectual *framework of ideas* they bring to bear on their projects (Checkland & Holwell, 1998). In comparison, case researchers seem more aware of the relations between their initial frameworks and the empirical findings. Reflecting on the requirements of a research process, Checkland (1981, p. 400) argues that "there must be an intellectual framework, declared in advance, in terms of which learning will be defined. Without such a framework, action research can quickly become indistinguishable from mere action."

The lack of declared-in-advance theoretical frameworks seems to be an important reason why action research has such difficulty positioning itself as a viable research practice. However, for case-study research, Yin (1989, 1994) discusses the crucial importance of the intellectual framework of ideas (or even propositions) that the researcher brings to the study. We do not argue that action research should qualify as hypothetico-deductive research, but we agree with Checkland and Holwell's (1998) replacement of hypotheses with "themes," and thus we argue that--aligned with theory-building case studies--action researchers need to declare such themes *if* they wish to do research acknowledged by their peers.

Moreover, there is also the difficulty of generalising results from action research (McKay & Marshall, 2001). Generally, case researchers do not experience this difficulty to the same extent, because case researchers have better possibilities for choosing the contexts that facilitate analytical generalisation, i.e., abstractions based on the empirical material. Meyer (2000, p. 8) observes that action research "is often written up as a case study and it is important to note that generalisation is therefore different from the more traditional forms of research." Further, he argues that case study and action research are "means by which theoretical explanations of phenomena can be generated using analytic induction" which are "rich in conceptual detail" and "readers are invited to judge the relevance of the findings to their own practice situation" (Meyer, 2000, p. 8). Coghlan (2002a, p. 63) claims "action research is fundamentally about telling a story as it happens."

We argue that, apart from story telling, case researchers also try to enrich and expand our understanding of phenomena beyond the level at which individual stories are constructed. Discussing different levels of knowledge, Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 70) claims that "in the study of human activity we cannot be satisfied with focusing on universals." Further, he suggests that because cases generate concrete, practical, and context-dependent knowledge, case studies generate valuable scientific knowledge: "the case study produces precisely the type of context-dependent knowledge which makes it possible to move from the lower to the higher levels in the learning process" (p. 71).

Like case research, action research also "does not attempt to create universal knowledge" (Coghlan, 2002a, p. 64). Thus, both types of research focus on local realities. However, whereas action researchers leave it to the reader to decide "what can be taken from the story" (Coghlan, 2002a, p. 64), case researchers seek to arrive at analytical generalisations of their work. We agree with Coghlan's (2002a, p. 64) view that, for action researchers, "it would be so much richer if the writer/presenter articulated why he/she thought this story should interest others and inform their understanding of organizations."

In sum, the transparency of research processes in action research can be improved by articulating and discussing (a) the framework of ideas brought into the study and (b) analytical generalisation of findings.

5. Action, Research, and the Issue of Synthesis

Most definitions of action research emphasise that new knowledge is produced through the solution of practical problems (Elden & Chisholm, 1993; McKay & Marshall, 2001; Shanks, Rouse, & Arnott, 1993). However, different action researchers accord different degrees of importance to the action (A) and the research (R) aspects--typically assigning a primary status to A and only a secondary status to R. For example, Elliot (1991, p. 49) argues that "the fundamental aim of action research is to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge."

Ironically, when action research was first introduced, the focus was as much on R as on A. Somehow, over the years, the attention on R seems to have gradually waned. This makes observers such as Babüroglu and Ravn (1992, p. 20) comment that "the nature of the scientific-knowledge component needs further clarification," and "insufficient clarification of the relation between practical knowledge and scientific knowledge may contribute to an impression that action research is essentially a juxtaposition of action and research, rather than a true synthesis."

Different understandings of such a synthesis exist in the literature of action research. For example, action research is considered to be "an approach for theory and practice to inform each other" (Molineux & Haslett, 2002, p. 466). In another formulation, Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 98) suggest that action research "is a disciplined way of developing valid knowledge and theory while promoting positive social change." There are several voices against the gradual reduction of R in action research. To cite Coghlan (2002a, p. 62), "organization development and action research frequently get a bad name through the work of some of the practitioners who appear to advocate that anything they do constitutes ... valid theory."

One approach towards a synthesis between A and R could be "thinking in two cycles," i.e., thinking in both action and research cycles (Morton, 1999). Emphasising the research cycle offers a mechanism for action researchers to clearly differentiate their activities from those of consultants and practical problem-solvers. Paying attention to the two cycles explicitly "makes it a lot easier for the action researcher, particularly the less experienced researcher, to ensure that they are doing research, and are not inadvertently trying to masquerade consultancy or problem solving as research." (McKay & Marshall, 2001, p. 51). Also, emphasising research cycle might offer a solution to the "methodological quandary" inherent in action research (Dash, 1999).

In 1957, Hodgkinson (1957) posed the question: "What are the grounds for placing confidence in action research?" Although this question was posed almost 50 years ago, it seems we have yet to spell out criteria of quality for action research. In view of the dual focus of action research, Dash (1999) suggests that conventional criteria of research quality might be inadequate and different criteria might be needed to evaluate the soundness of action research projects. We argue that good quality in A cannot substitute

good quality in R and vice versa. Sound action research should be of good quality both in solving actual problems and in generating research outcomes.

It seems action researchers have not enabled their peers to re-examine exactly how they arrived at their conclusions (Kirk & Miller, 1986). To overcome such deficits, Pothas and de Wet (2000, p. 162) suggest that researchers should engage in a "constant process of critical reflection, and the explicating thereof in the research report."

Demonstrating how theory and practice can inform each other, paying attention to both action and research cycles, establishing relevant quality criteria, and maintaining critical reflection are important for moving towards a synthesis between action and research. Without an effective synthesis, action research would remain a strange outsider in the world of research.

6. Creating a Wider Audience for Action Research

For action research to be acknowledged and developed as a viable form of research practice, it is important for action researchers to report their work to a wider audience, in a language that makes it discussable. If necessary, such an audience may even have to be created (Gustavsen, 2003; Levin, 2003; Reason, 2003). We suggest that the following issues are of critical importance in the quest for creating a wider audience for action research and making it a discussable research practice: (a) increasing transparency of action research processes, (b) declaring frameworks brought into action research projects, (c) discussing analytical generalisation and transferability of findings, and (d) defining appropriate forms of accumulation of results from action research projects.

6.1. Creating a Wider Audience for Action Research

There is an issue of transparency in action research. A similar issue exists in other forms of research too. Discussing the dissemination of qualitative research in general, Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 2) point to the fact that "we do not really see how the researcher got from 3,600 pages of field notes to the final conclusions, as sprinkled with vivid illustrations as they may be." The issue is perhaps even more prominent in action research due to the following: (a) action research is highly responsive to the circumstances obtained within the project, (b) it is comprised of a series of iterations, and (c) it is extremely difficult to separate findings from the research process (Greenwood, 2002). In any case, communicating action research to a wider audience will require a greater degree of transparency of the processes involved. A good example of this would be Street and Meister's (2004) article in *MIS Quarterly* which offers a thorough discussion of their action research process.

6.2. Declaring Theoretical Frameworks

We do acknowledge that action researchers' theoretical foci might change during action research projects and we agree with Dick (2003) that action research is less constrained

by existing theory as well as more flexible and responsive than other research approaches. We are also aware of the fact that some action researchers might find that a declaration-in-advance of theoretical framework would hamper one of the key advantages of action research, i.e., theoretical flexibility.

Sometimes, action researchers prefer to draw on the tenets of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a viable research strategy when we do not wish to be informed or guided by our prior conceptions about the phenomena to be investigated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). However, action researchers often use their prior conceptions and existing theoretical frameworks. Therefore, declaring the notions and frameworks in advance would not only improve action researchers' understanding of their own work, it would also facilitate better communication with a wider audience.

6.3. Discussing Analytical Generalisation

Action researchers work with local theories. We argue that working with local theories imposes an obligation on the action researcher--the obligation to discuss transferability of their findings. Although most generalisable studies involve causal models, we do not argue that action researchers should seek to develop such models. On the contrary, we argue that causal models are inadequate for description of most human actions due to the presence of infinite number of highly interdependent factors. Therefore we suggest that action researchers should look for other types of transferable results that might be taken from specific projects and made available in other situations and settings.

6.4. Defining Accumulation of Results

Action research "aims for an understanding of a complex human process rather than prescribing a universal social law" (Baskerville & Lee, 1999, p. 7). Still, we cannot ignore Street and Meister's (2004, p. 496) reminder that "the research outputs must have a broader interest and theoretical significance if the work is to be truly differentiated from, as many critics characterize it, consulting." Therefore, in order to communicate to a wider audience, action researchers have to recognise and specify those results which accumulate within and between action research projects, in an incremental manner. Action researchers can choose to participate in the prevailing "scientific discourse" (Levin, 2003) or develop ways of extending it so as to facilitate the specification of their unique results and the nature of their accumulation from project to project.

7. Conclusion

This paper addressed the issue of creating a wider audience for action research, so as to broaden and deepen the form of research it represents. It was argued that important lessons could be derived from the discussions pertaining to case-study research, especially through the notion of analytical generalisation.

Four key tasks were identified to facilitate the creation of a wider audience for action research. These tasks serve one common goal: to present action research as a discussable form of research practice. The tasks are related to (a) increasing transparency, (b) declaring prior notions and frameworks, (c) discussing transferability, and (d) defining appropriate forms of accumulation of results.

Finally, we envisage that action researchers could change the ways in which action research results are reported. Forms of reporting that help peers to assess trustworthiness of these results would be important for creating a wider audience for action research.

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