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Revisiting Action Research

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Abstract

Purpose: The focus of this paper is to examine what is action research, how it is different from scientific research and how each can contribute to the body of knowledge, while emphasizing that one does not replace the other.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The trajectories of action research are reviewed in this paper.

Research Findings: Findings suggest action research brings about significant contributions to social change. Further, action research investigators are in a prime position to determine the best method for action research depending on the research issue(s).

Research Limitations/Implications: This paper is limited to a general review of action research in the broad fields of education, science, and social science. Nonetheless, this paper argues that the continued growth of action research should strengthen the position and contribution of action research towards knowledge creation and extension.

Originality/Value: This paper sheds light on the trajectories, current position, and future of action research. Further, some comparisons with general scientific research are offered.

Keywords: Action research

Manuscript Category: General Review

Introduction

Action research has been around for more than a half century, becoming a significant part of the educational field of study. Action research in the field of education has a history traced back to the early work of Lindeman (1925) and Lewin (1946) with a more modern day expansion of action research by Argyris (1992) and Trist (1993). The goal of action research is to have the researcher directly involved in the research environment (social inquiry) and collectively working towards defining a problem or re-conceptualize an organizational change (Argyris, 1992;

Lewin, 1946; Lindeman, 1925; Trist, 1993). The goal of action research is to investigate an issue, seek input from those directly impacted, implement, and evaluate to ensure that the intended results are being achieved, and ultimately, to contribute to knowledge extension in a given area for future research.

The debate over scientific research versus action research between practitioners and scholars has been heated, with no easy answer or end to the dispute (Chein et al., 1948; Greenwood, 2002; Ilisko, 2013). The focus of this paper is to examine what is action research, how it is different from scientific research, and how each can contribute to the body of knowledge, while emphasizing that one does not replace the other.

History of Action Research

Linderman (1925) introduced the concept of action research and Lewin (1946) furthered its use in the study of social science, in which many scholars consider this as the start of action research (Boog, 2003; Marrow, 1967). Glassman et al. (2012) argue that action research incorporates social activists, organizational/community leaders, and scholars in a process to bring about change.

Lippitt and Radke (1946) were pioneering authors to publish an article that uses the term 'action research' and explaining its core principles. In their work, it was suggested that action research is not limited to academic endeavors but also for organizational, communal, and political purposes; for example, to define a problem or re-conceptualize an existing one. Moreover, the action research process takes into consideration many of the dynamics of a complex social system that may influence a change process (Susman and Evered, 1978). For example, Mead (1934) explored the interactions between group members from an industrial psychology standpoint, in which its findings allowed members of the organization to interact, engage, collaborate, and analyze in a learning process to bring about organizational change.

Over the years, action research has emerge as a scholarly research area with a deeply entrenched process focused on progressive education (Gardner, 1946). Argyris and Schon (1989) and Trist (1993) are three modern-day researchers who advanced the ideas of action research. Argyris and Schon (1989) studied autocratic/hierarchical organization and focused on the behaviors of organizational members when making decisions and their abilities to influence change as well as identify key organizational problems. That is, their study focused on how organizational members can influence the changes or problems identified within the organization.

In contrast, Trist (1993) focused on social ecology while maintaining that not all answers will come from conventional research methods. The social ecology contends that the researcher will need to consider the formal and information lines of communications within the organization, the technical and social flow of information that could have an impact on the intervention, and the results of the research project. In Trist's framework, all participants should be encouraged to provide input into the process and that everyone is treated equally and fairly while seeking information. The emphasis is noted in the action research process – that is, to bring all of participants from the group together in a nonhierarchical setting to allow a democratic decision-making process to bring about long lasting change in the organization that would be acceptable across all managerial levels in the organization.

More importantly, Feinberg (1992) highlighted a need for action research to be grounded in science in order for it to be accepted. Avison et al. (1999, p. 94) state that, 'to make academic research relevant, researchers should try out their theories with practitioners in real situations and real organizations'. The action research process utilizes 'research and practice' to complement each other, rather than using one as a standalone process. Thus, the action research process is gaining legitimacy in the realm of science since its research process is grounded in philosophical viewpoints. This process is also gaining credibility in the field of education with more and more colleges adopting the action research criteria as part of their course curriculum (du Toit, 2012; Jelas et al. 2011). As students earn their doctorate degrees and learn to use action research, the prospects for the process of action research to gain additional credibility in the academic world appears to be very promising.

Action Research

Action research is a type of research used in organizations to gain a deeper understanding of the issues facing the organization, while allowing the internal research and the organizational participants an opportunity to openly discuss possible options and alternatives that will produce long-term permanent change in the organization (Argyris and Schon, 1989). Researchers (e.g., Argyris, 1997; Lewin, 1946; Lippitt and Radke, 1946) suggested part of this change process is rooted in the organizational learning process. Lewis (1946) argued that traditional science was not fulfilling the gap in social problems in organizations and that both participants and social scientists will need to work in partnership to fulfill the gap.

To gain a deeper understating of action research, one should consider the following definition as stated by Rapoport (1970, p. 499): 'action research aims to contribute both to the practice concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework'. However, positivist science relies on the researcher possessing the knowledge that the action will be crafted and that the action undertaken is based on a submissive world, not allowing for significant interaction and input from those within the organization as to the possible actions and predicted outcomes. In the positivist science approach, once the researcher predicts a possible outcome, the researcher takes the predicted action and waits for the outcomes to occur. Susman and Evered (1978, p. 598) states that 'any interference by the researcher in the events that intervene between action and outcome nullifies the significance of the predication. The action researcher collaborates with clients in diagnosis, selection of alternative actions, and evaluation of outcomes.' The traditional science research is to develop new knowledge, while action research is to solve practical problems and to improve practice (Avison et al., 1999). Hence, it is clear that the researcher plays very different roles depending on the type of research being conducted and the research being conducted yields a different process.

Chiasson et al. (2008) argue that the action research process creates theoretical and practical knowledge that can be shared with others and build on a body of knowledge. Susman and Evered (1978, p. 600) state that, 'the action researcher learns how to use earlier infrastructure efforts as models so that persons in other organizations can learn from and improve upon their example.' The action research process is a form of research that organizations can utilize in the change process to bring about long-term change from stakeholders directly involved in the process

and impacted by the change. In the case of action research, the internal research is part of the data prepared and used in the project, while the results influence the organization and not others. Others may use the research project as a baseline for an issue that they may be experiencing and that the research results can be replicated in another organization.

Action research is not exclusive to one style or method of data collection; the researcher can use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed method, depending on what methods will be best suited for the research question (Argyris and Schon 1989; Herr and Anderson, 2005). Action research tends to stand out based on the fact that it can use a variety of research methods and as mentioned earlier the participants are directly involved in the process. Guiffrida et al. (2011) add that action research is different from other forms of research in the following ways: (1) seeks knowledge that is generalizable and that can be used in similar settings, (2) conducted in a real-world or vivo setting, and (3) incorporates change or advocacy for the participants of the research project. One thing in common, action research and traditional science research will publish the results for the intervention so others will have a larger body of knowledge. How much credit is given to action research findings and traditional science findings will depend on research rigor and contribution to theory and practice.

Local Circumstances and Cooperation

One drawback to action research is that it is locally used and on a case-by-case basis, often failing to extend beyond the local situations identified. That is, in general, action research does not cover large-scale social issues efforts (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). Action research is utilized in the public sector and private sector with the primary audience being other professionals, government, or private organizations (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Love et al., 2012; Susman and Evered, 1978). Higher education, local school administrators, and students use action research to bring about desired change, whereas the traditional science researcher goal is working towards peer reviewed methods and results. The researcher will need to determine what research approach is best suited for the issues they may be investigating, determine who the intended audience will be for the findings, and the extent of the research being proposed.

The action research project operates in a real-world organization or in a vivo setting, resulting in the researcher being an active member of the organization, to recommend possible types of intervention for a local issue, often through systemic changes or advocacy (Herr and Anderson, 2005). One important aspect of action research is that the practitioner is part of the collaboration in the organization. However it is not required that the practitioner assumes a position as the lead researcher for the project. The participants of the group are the ones who help frame the problem in the organization. As a result, the action research project has a much broader approach than the traditional practitioner research.

Action research is about working in cooperation, so the researcher who wants to conduct action research in an organization must obtain approval from the organization if the process is going to work. However, Avison et al. (1999) explained that the action researcher who faces internal conflict between the research project intent and the stakeholders within the organization would most likely fail. In the case of positivist science, the researcher is

detached from the organization under review and the members of the organization are objects to the researcher. In comparison, the researcher in an action research project is considered an internal member of the organization along with the members of the organization with whom they will collaborate with on determining the project issues.

The action research project is going to require a strong communication process between the researcher and the various stakeholders within the organization, to ensure that everyone can come together to openly and honestly discuss the issue/problem and decide on an action. Each organization has its own culture of communication and understanding; the action researcher must be familiar with these interpretations. Habermas (1987) notes that a group of people rely on cooperation in a common framework of interpretation whereby they understand each other based upon past experiences and expressions. He goes on to explain the theory of communicative action, a process that people in a cooperation share meanings and interpretations, allowing people to have their voice in the process, thereby creating a social process for the stakeholders (Habermas, 1987). The action researcher will be responsible for creating a communicative action for those individuals involved in the research process, creating a process of mutual sharing and understanding between stakeholders.

Research Rigor

One significant part of the action research process involves formulating the research design, once the appropriate research question is determined. Many researchers will agree that research rigorous methods are important to any type of research; action research rigorous methods are very important based on the fact that the research results will be challenging established paradigms in the organization (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Lewin, 1946; Susman and Evered 1978). For example, action research may be used to examine the interviewing process of tenured faculty or members at a college, in which the research findings could recommend a change in a long-standing process (behavior) used in the organization. The research findings will face intense scrutiny from those who have been with the organization for a long time or the organizations hierarchies as to the need for change (Argyris, 1992). More often than not, because of the intense scrutiny, the researcher will use outside research completed by established scholars in the given field to dismiss the scrutiny by others.

A central issue to the action research process involves methodological rigorous forms of inquiry. Thorne (2008) suggests that the action research need not follow the same standards of rigor used in traditional quantitative or qualitative research. As a result, Feldman (2007) argues that action research continues to face questions of the level of rigor in the research process. McMahon and Jefford (2009, p. 350) add that, 'action research, by its nature, is much less predictable and predictive than other forms of research.' Thus, the action research process lacks stringent rigorous protocols in part to allow the researcher the ability to deviate or modify the research plan as needed, not found in traditional laboratory research plans.

However, research rigor is very important in the field of research. Biggs and Buchler (2007) argued that research rigor focus is on the investigation process used in obtaining the research findings. In the case of action research, the research will demonstrate that the project has undergone a rigorous review (the process) of the current research findings (technical). The focus, in this case, is the methodical and complete examination that the researcher

used in the technical review process for the project. Duncan (2011, p. 4) argues that 'in practice-based research – just as in traditional academic research – the standards, authority, and responsibility for evaluation that fall under the jurisdiction of the discipline contribute to the depth of rigor subsequently attributed to the practice.' Hence, regardless of how one defines what is research rigor or the process that a research project should undergo, the key determinant remains within the discipline community that the research is being conducted that will guide the level of rigor that a research project must undergo.

Ethical Considerations

The topic of ethics is central to any type of research, ensuring that the participants of the research project are treated in a fair manner while balancing the risk and reward of the research project. Regrettably, in some prior research projects, human subjects were poorly treated and as a direct result, research ethical guidelines have been produced to ensure that a research project will not harm any human subjects, while pursuing greater knowledge base (Emanuel and Starratt, 2004; Gregory, 2010; Wendler and Grady, 2000). One process of conducting ethical research is ensuring that the participants have full knowledge of the purpose of the research and if there is any possible risk of participating in the research, all before participating in the project. The research participant is allowed to grant approval to participate in the research and retains the right to withdraw from the research project at any point during the procedure (Khanlou and Peter, 2005).

Further, it is important to ensure that the researcher has fully maximized the research benefits and at the same time has minimized the level of risk to research participants (Emanuel and Starratt, 2004). Today, researchers are held to the highest ethical standards, to ensure that research projects are performed in the safest manner and allowing fair treatment to participants of the research project. Conducting any type of research to obtain a new body of knowledge should never come at the expense of doing harm to human subjects.

The action research proposal will need to have an Intuitional Review Board (IRB), in the academic setting, that will examine the proposal purpose, design, participants, and project activities, to ensure that the research proposal will not bring harm to the participants, while ensuring that the highest level of ethical standards are being upheld. Hemming (2006) suggest that the goal of the IRB is to protect human subjects from experiencing harm as a result of research. However, most IRBs are overly protective of research proposals in fear of losing federal funding or increased legal actions. Thus, the IRB process must ensure a balance in the protection of the research institution and the research participants, while allowing a process that will not discourage research or create a backlog of research proposals at the IRB.

Conclusion

While action research has gain increased credibility, the reality is that action research is not a replacement for scientific research. Depending on the type of issues/concerns that are being investigated, it will be up to the individual researcher to determine what form of research method will be best suited for the investigation. Action research is used in the field of education and plays a significant role in social sciences when it comes to

investigating and bringing about social change (Glassman et al., 2012). Action research also has some limitations; the fact that for the most part, action research will be at the local level and might be reproduced in other like sized organization; thus, the one drawback to action research is that it is less likely to be utilized in large-scale projects (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003).

One key element to action research is that the researcher is directly involved with the research participants (to make decisions), compared to positivist science (draw conclusions) and is not actively working with the project participants. Data analysis from an action research standpoint involves the focus on practical and is not statistical driven, whereas positivist science research data analysis undergoes a rigorous statistical analysis of the random or representative sampling of participants in the project (Argyris, 1992; Stringer, 2007). Action research focus is on the improvement of educational or social practice in an organization and will be dependent on the equal input from participants to determine the research questions; in this case, theory plays a secondary process (Feldman, 2007).

As the body of action research grows, credibility is gained in the field of research. As discussed, action research is not a new research process and in fact, it has a significantly long history, with various scholars making large contributions to the field of study, further building credibility for the use of action research in various disciplines. The addition of more and more colleges and universities adopting the action research process, with more students utilizing the action research process in the pursuit of a doctoral degree, will further heighten the level of credibility on the use of action research.

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