Action research

Contents

1 Introduction

This supplement expands the introduction to action research in Chapter 6. Along with additional details of how to carry out action research it offers an overview of the design's strengths and weaknesses, along with additional references for further study.

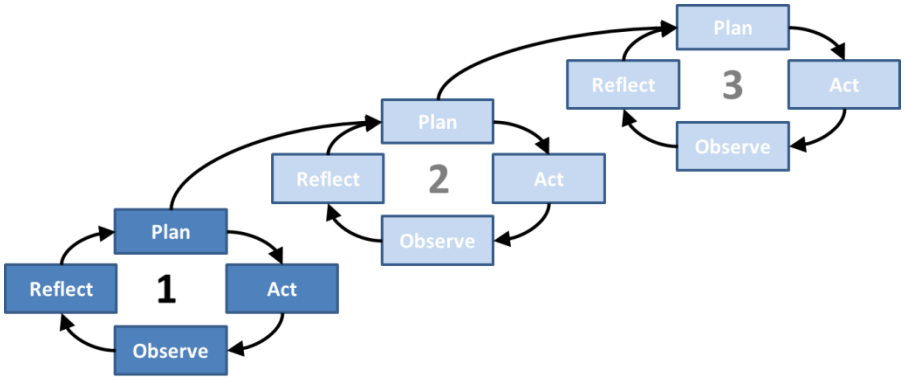
In 1946 the social psychologist Kurt Lewin wrote a paper advocating a 'type of action-research [sic]' that would lead to social action. 'Research that produces nothing but books,' he argued, 'will not suffice' (Lewin 1946: 35). Instead Lewin proposed a cyclical, iterative approach to research involving planning what was to be done, taking action and fact-finding about the results. Lewin's ideas have since become one of the key influences in what is now known as **action research**. Over time, action research has taken different directions but we can nevertheless identify key features of the approach as we are using it here:

- The close relationship between knowledge acquisition and action; action research is 'research *in action* rather than research *about action*' (Coghlan and Brannick 2010: 4). Action is taken to improve practice and the research generates new knowledge about how and why the improvements came about.
- Action research is conducted as a collaborative partnership between the researcher and a group in an organisation or community who participate in the process of the action research. Research proceeds as a cycle of joint planning, action, observation and reflection, where the reflection phase paves the way for further cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting in a spiral of learning (Figure 1). Different

writers have used different terminology for the steps in the action research cycle. Coghlan and Brannick (2010: 8), for example, label them ‘constructing’, ‘planning action’, ‘taking action’ and ‘evaluating action’.

- The results are shared amongst participants and for action research in an academic context the output typically also includes a public report such as a dissertation or thesis.
- The output is ‘actionable knowledge’ (Coghlan 2007: 293) that is useful to both the practitioner and academic communities.

Figure 1 – Action research cycles



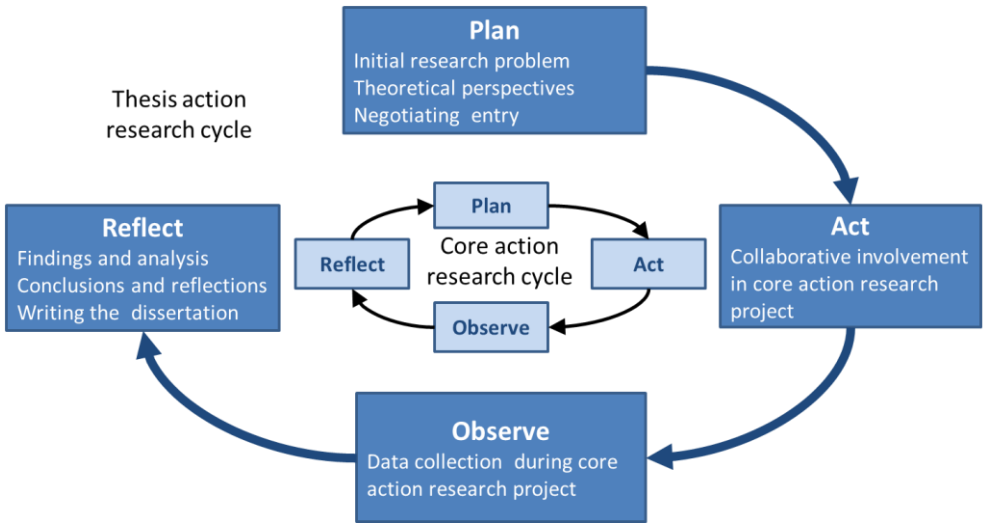
2 Applications of action research

Applications of action research reflect the different directions in which the method has been taken, although its action orientation makes it appropriate for investigating ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions where the focus is on producing solutions to problems encountered in practice. Within organisations and management, some of the early action research projects investigated issues around autonomous workgroups in organisations and action research has continued to be applied in organisational development and change. Action research has also been used as a research method by management students who are studying while working and who undertake the research in their own organisation, an approach Coghlan (2007) calls ‘insider action research’. Another approach to action research has been to emphasise the collaborative and democratic possibilities of action research alongside its focus on changing participants’ situations. Sometimes described as participatory action research, advocates have claimed for it an emancipatory potential.

3 Outline of the design

Whilst some variant of the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle lies at the heart of most action research studies, the precise form depends on the approach chosen and the aims of the research. When the research is being done as part of an academic assessment, Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) suggest that there are really two action research cycles operating in parallel. One is the *core* action research cycle which focuses on the practical problem to be solved. The other is the *thesis* action research cycle in which the researcher is engaged in planning, acting, observing and reflecting with regard to the academic part of the research project and their learning from it. Coghlan (2007: 300) refers to this learning as 'meta-learning' and emphasises its role in developing theory from the core action research project. Our presentation of action research builds on Zuber-Skerritt and Perry's (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt 1992, Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002: 175) approach by assuming that your research involves both a core action research cycle and a thesis action research cycle (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Action research project for a thesis or dissertation (adapted from Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002)



Planning for the overall project begins with the identification of a research problem for which an action research approach is appropriate. Unlike much traditional academic research where the researcher decides on a problem and then negotiates access to a suitable research site, in action research the source of the problem and the initiative for seeking a solution may come from practitioners facing the problem who become in effect the client for the project. This highlights a potential tension in action research in terms of the need to address both the

client's objectives and the academic requirements, requiring the researcher to serve 'two taskmasters' as Rapoport (1970: 505) puts it. Before the project can get under way, therefore, you should reach agreement with the client over a range of issues, including (Davison et al. 2004):

- That action research is appropriate
- The focus and goals of the project
- Client commitment
- Roles and responsibilities
- Procedures to be followed during the project
- Ethical issues, including consent to participate and confidentiality

The planning stage of an academic action research project will also involve a review of relevant literature. This is important so that you can locate your topic in terms of its relevance to the academic community. Theory may also be useful in addressing the practitioner problem. During the core action research cycle theoretical frameworks can help, for instance, with diagnosis as well as providing a basis for 'conversation and mechanisms for collaborative sense making and joint action planning and action' (Coghlan and Brannick 2010: 93).

The core action research project involves iterations of the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle that we have already introduced. It is important to emphasise the collaborative nature of the process and the need to encourage dialogue and participation, even though this might be challenging in hierarchical organisations characterised by unequal power relations (Gill and Johnson 2010). Looking at each of the four steps in turn:

- During the planning stage, an action plan is developed that will achieve some agreed goals. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988: 66) suggest that such plans can encompass change in three 'registers': how language is used in the situation, what activities and practices are employed, and how social relationships and organisations are structured.
- The action stage involves implementing the plan whilst recognising the need for flexibility and judgement. Even so, it may sometimes be necessary to revert to the planning stage if the proposed actions cannot be implemented.
- Action should be accompanied by monitoring and observation of the results. A range of data collection methods can be used, including documents, interviews, diaries,

observations and questionnaires, along with secondary data. Observation feeds into the next stage of the cycle by providing the basis for reflection.

- The final stage is reflection, in which the researcher and the group collaboratively 'analyse, synthesise, interpret, explain and draw conclusions' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988: 86) about what has been achieved and identify possible ways of moving forward. Depending on the outcomes, another cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting may be set in motion.

At some point you will have to bring the core action research cycle to an end and exit the field. Davison et al. (2004: 73) recommend that departure should be linked to the achievement of the agreed objectives or some other 'explicit justification', although they acknowledge that this can be problematic in some situations such as a breakdown in the relationship between the researcher and the client. As a guide, if you are doing action research as part of an academic qualification, the core action research project should not take up more than one-third of the time available for the qualification (Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002).

The core action research cycle represents the 'act' and 'observe' stages of the researcher's own thesis cycle (Figure 2). Here you face the challenge of managing the demands of both aspects of the project and they can sometimes conflict. Make sure, therefore, that the research requirements are built into the agreements reached with the client or sponsor and that suitable arrangements are made to facilitate data collection. As with the core project, a wide range of data collection techniques can be used but the research diary or journal will be an important tool to record your observations and to develop reflective skills as the research unfolds.

The reflection stage of the thesis action research cycle is where the researcher engages in the meta learning discussed above. The formal output from this stage will depend on the project. In addition to any dissertation or thesis, other reports may be needed for the client group to use or to share the findings of the project more broadly. When reporting your findings you will need to give careful thought to how you will comply with agreements on anonymity and confidentiality and also the extent to which your collaborators should be involved in reviewing any proposed output.

Research in practice 1 gives an example of an action research study.

Research in practice 1 – Action research study on the role of information systems in small business growth

Action research study on the role of information systems in small business growth

Street and Meister (2004) used action research to investigate how and why a management team in a small business developed an information system (IS) to support their growth needs. The project was carried out in collaboration with five managers at a Canadian electronics manufacturing company (referred to as ELCO) that was seeking to grow its business. The practical goal of the project was to recommend potential changes to the organisation's IS in support of those growth plans.

The research team adopted a 5-step action research cycle consisting of action planning, action taking, evaluating, specifying learning and diagnosing. Three iterations of the cycle were used, involving baseline analysis, strategy planning and the development of a requirements specification for a new IS solution. One of the findings from the project is the importance of internal transparency of information within the organisation. In addition, the researchers developed a process model drawing on the theory of punctuated equilibrium to help understand the experiences at ELCO and the relationship between internal transparency, IS and business growth.

4 Strengths and weaknesses of action research

We have given some flavour of the unique characteristics of action research when compared to the other designs discussed in this book and it is those characteristics that in many ways represent the core strength of action research. Coghlan (2004: 7), for example, claims that action research 'has the potential to confront the self-perpetuating limitations [such as practical relevance] that befall traditional research approaches'. Writing in the context of postgraduate research, Dick (2002) suggests that an action research project can give researchers the opportunity to improve their own professional practice, to ameliorate the situation investigated and to gain their degree. Such arguments may be particularly relevant in the case of practising managers researching in their own organisation.

Action research is not, however, without its critics. One criticism is that action research is 'unscientific', at least in so far as scientific is understood in terms of the positivist approach to research. Given its engagement with problem solving in a particular context, questions can also be asked about the relevance of any findings beyond the immediate research setting.

Action research also raises a number of practical challenges for the would-be action researcher. We have highlighted the potential tension between the demands of the practical problem and the research but Rapoport (1970) also draws attention to the risk of the researcher becoming over-involved in the situation or of being used as a tool in organisational politics. This may be a particular difficulty for the insider action researcher who is simultaneously a researcher and organisational member. Some ethical issues may be especially problematic in action research. The principle of informed consent, for instance, may be hard to apply in a rapidly evolving research situation or where the boundaries of the project are ill-defined and there can be unforeseen political consequences as a result of the research.

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