Action Research in the Academy: Why and Whither? Reflections on the Changing Nature of Research1

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Ten years ago I published an article in IBAR on action research (Coghlan, 1994). In that article I introduced action research, defined it and contrasted it with case studies and ethnography. In this paper I want to reflect on the ten years of practising action research both in the role of researcher and in the role of developing it in the university setting.

An Introduction To Action Research

What is Action Research?

Several broad characteristics define action research (Adler, Shani and Styhre, 2004; Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Eden and Huxham, 1996; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Gummesson, 2000; Peters and Robinson, 1984; Reason and Torbert, 2001; Susman and Evered, 1978):

- Research *in* action, rather than research *about* action;
- Participative;
- Concurrent with action;
- A sequence of events and an approach to problem solving.

Firstly, action research focuses on research *in* action, rather than research *about* action. The central idea is that action research uses a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organisational issues together with those who experience these issues directly. Action research works through a cyclical four-step process of consciously and deliberately: 1) planning, 2) taking action 3) and evaluating the action, 4) leading to further planning.

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Secondly, action research is participative and democratic. Members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the cyclical process outlined above. Such participation is frequently as research *with* people rather than research *on* people.

Thirdly, action research is research concurrent with action. The goal is to make that action more effective while simultaneously building up a body of scientific knowledge.

Finally, action research is both a sequence of events and an approach to problem solving. As a sequence of events, it comprises iterative cycles of gathering data, feeding it back to those concerned, analysing the data, planning action, taking action and evaluating, leading to further data gathering and so on. As an approach to problem solving, it is an application of the scientific method of fact-finding and experimentation to practical problems requiring action solutions and involving the collaboration and cooperation of the action researchers and members of the organisational system. The desired outcomes of the action research approach are not just solutions to the immediate problems; they provide important learning from outcomes, both intended and unintended, and a contribution to scientific knowledge and theory.

Action research works from its own quality requirements (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Reason (2003a) discusses that the criteria against which quality in action research might be judged may be based on a range of choice points which action researchers make clear and transparent. For instance, the quality of an action research may be judged on the practical knowledge that emerges or the quality of participation. In a similar vein, Levin (2003a) argues that action research's contribution to scientific discourse is not a matter of sticking to the rigour-relevance polarity but of focusing on vital arguments relating to participation, real-life problems, joint-meaning construction and workable solutions.

The Origins of Action Research

Action research originates primarily in the work of Kurt Lewin and his colleagues and associates (Coghlan and Brannick, 2003). In the mid-1940s, Lewin and his associates conducted action research projects in different social settings. Through the following decades, action research in organisations developed in organisation development, particularly in the US (French and Bell, 1999), the industrial democracy tradition in Scandinavia (Greenwood and Levin, 1998) and the socio-technical work of the Tavistock Institute in the UK (Trist and Murray, 1993). It also has deep roots in the emancipatory movements out of the work of Paolo Freire and Marx, from feminism and liberation theology (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, 2003; Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

Action research has developed to become a family of approaches with many different expressions. The often bewildering array of approaches within the broad action research term reflect different emphases within the core process or practice in different fields. So contemporary action researchers need to be famil-

iar with the elaborations of action science, clinical inquiry, developmental action inquiry, appreciative inquiry, cooperative inquiry, participatory action research and then approaches from outside the direct lineage that have parallel theory and practice, such as action learning and reflective practice.

Similarly, there is no one way of doing action research. For instance, distinctions between *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* approaches (Heron, 1996), and *mechanistic* and *organistic* approaches (Coghlan, 2003) reflect emphases on how much the inquiry process focuses on the practical outcome or the inquiry process itself. Action research in the Scandinavian tradition typically focuses on structural issues in working life and regional development (Fricke and Totterdill, 2004), while the CARPP (Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice) approach at the University of Bath places its emphasis on the person engaging in the inquiry (Reason, 2003b).

Contrasts with Positivist Science

Action research can be contrasted with positivist science (Susman and Evered, 1978). The aim of positivist science is the creation of universal knowledge or covering law, while action research focuses on knowledge in action. Accordingly, the knowledge created in positivist science is universal, while that created through action research is particular, situational and out of praxis. In action research, the data are contextually embedded and interpreted. In positivist science, findings are validated by logic, measurement and the consistency achieved by the consistency of prediction and control. In action research, the basis for validation is the conscious and deliberate enactment of the action research cycle. The positivist scientist's relationship to the setting is one of neutrality and detachment while the action researcher is immersed in the setting and relates to the process in a reflective and reflexive mode. In short, the contrast of roles is between that of a detached observer in positivist science and of an actor and agent of change in action research (Riordan, 1995).

What Role Do the Action Researchers Play?

Generally, action researchers are outside agents who act as facilitators of the action and reflection within an organisation. In such cases, it is useful to talk about the action researcher and the client system, i.e. those in the organisation who are engaging in the action research in collaboration with the external action researcher. Greenwood and Levin (1998) refer to the action researcher as the "friendly outsider". In other settings the action researcher may be an insider to the organisation, perhaps in an internal consulting role or as a manager (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001).

Action research in business schools typically works within the pragmatic school where the focus is on developing solutions to business and organisational issues (Schein, 1995), for example in operations management (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002), information systems (Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1996), continuous improvement (Coghlan and Coughlan, 2003) and IT-enabled change (McDonagh and Coghlan, 2001).

Why Action Research?

There has long been a crisis in the field of organisational science. Susman and Evered (1978: 582) noted that "the findings in our scholarly management journals are only remotely related to the real world of practising managers". In their view, it appears that this dilemma is rooted in positivist research approaches that dominate the field. Such approaches "are deficient in their capacity to generate knowledge for use by members of organisations" (Susman and Evered, 1978: 585). Supporting this contention, Schein (1993: 703) reflected that "we have largely adopted a traditional research paradigm that has not worked very well, a paradigm that has produced very reliable results about very unimportant things". In a similar vein, it has been argued that most research in the strategy domain is "irrelevant" since it is "increasingly and prematurely stuck in a normal science straightjacket" (Bettis, 1991: 315). The practical relevance of much IT-based research has been seriously challenged also. Senn (1998: 23–4) argued that "a great deal of the academic research conducted in information systems is not valued by IT practitioners" and that such research "is not relevant, readable, or reachable". With respect to marketing, Hunt (1994: 17) argues, "if we wish even to keep up with marketing practice – let alone lead it – we need to rethink our theories and empirical studies of marketing practice".

In the view of Greenwood (2002), the pillars of positivism – objectivity, controls and rational choice – are indefensible, yet positivism continues to dominate social science research within the university. Positivist social scientists study issues of interest to themselves and are not driven by the intensity or importance of social problems. Positivist social science is self-referential and reflects an inward-looking focus of university life. Research subjects are socially passive; research is done *on* them. Despite such strident criticism, positivist social scientists have not changed their research paradigms.

Reason and Torbert (2001: 5–6) reflect that after the linguistic turn of postmodernism it is now time for the "action turn" where we can re-vision our view of the nature and purpose of social science:

> We argue that since all human persons are participating actors in their world, the purpose of inquiry is not simply or even primarily to contribute to the field of knowledge in a field, to deconstruct take-for-granted realities, or to develop emancipatory theory, but rather to forge a more direct link between the intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes *directly* to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part.

Hence they argue for a transformational social science.

In the context of the gap between research and action, action research has a significant contribution to make to fill that gap (Haslett et al., 2002; Sarah et al., 2002). Action research repudiates the research-action split inherent in positivism and enacts dialogue between theory and practice with the aim of creating actionable knowledge. It does not impose expert knowledge but rather

creates collaborative environments where research experts and local stakeholders share and work with different kinds of knowledge and share the intellectual property. The collaborative process between researchers and local stakeholders involves shared question formulation, data collection, data analysis and testing in action. It demands reflective practice on the strengths and weaknesses of our own practice. The world does not deliver social problems in neat disciplinary packages. Because it is holistic, action research has the capability to study complex, dynamic difficult problems. As Gibbons et al. (1994) argue, it is time for a mode of research that is transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, socially accountable, reflexive and produced in the context of application. "The new production of knowledge" as articulated by Gibbons and his colleagues, is a network activity and research, therefore, needs to move away from a model whereby it is embedded currently in the expertise of isolated individuals operating from a top-down expert model (Gustavsen, 2003).

Action Research in the Academy

Action research has had a troubled history in university-based research (for example Levin, 2003a). "Is action research real research?" is not uncommon as a symposium topic, particularly in a positivist-oriented academic culture where engagement is perceived as a contaminant to good research. In a reflective piece on the current state of action research, which generated a series of responses (Arnkil, 2004; Dick, 2003; Eikeland, 2003; Greenwood, 2004; Levin, 2003b; Reason, 2003b), Greenwood (2002) poses the question of why action research has not taken over the social sciences. He provides two answers. The first is suppression: because action research feels oppressed in the academy it has adopted a defensive posture and has stayed silent. Indeed a great deal of action research takes place outside of the academy in social research centres. His second reason is negligence: he states categorically that action research has often been sloppy, passive, inadequately reflective and, sometimes, flatly incompetent. He argues strongly that action researchers need to challenge universities and public agencies to reallocate their resources in order to serve the people. Sherman and Torbert (2000) attempt just that. In a volume of papers that describes a number of projects where action and inquiry were interwoven in real time, they confront the general isolation that university research has from its local environment.

While action research in masters programmes has been long established in Irish universities, action research doctorates are beginning to emerge. In the School of Business Studies in Trinity College Dublin, two successful action research doctorates are illustrative. Jacobs (2003), at the behest of the organisation, worked as an action researcher in a healthcare provider and facilitated the development of listening within the organisation as a contribution to its strategic direction and articulated a theory of responsiveness. Nolan undertook doctoral research on an organisation he had founded to confront long-term unemployment. Through action research, he identified the underpinning success of the project and created a framework by which other social ills might

be confronted (Nolan and Coghlan, 2002). In both of these doctoral dissertations the quality of the action research process lay in the reflexive cycles of action and reflection, the quality of collaboration with members of the respective organisations and the practical outcomes.

Whither Action Research?

From questions posed by Gibbons et al. (1994) and Gustavsen (2003) we can reflect on the following challenging question: "If research is a network activity, what are the implications for Ph.D. research which is largely fundamentally focused on individual researchers controlling and grasping all that is to be known in the field of his/her research?"

There are two developments taking place in the wider context that I think are worthy of note as ways of considering this question. Firstly, there is the growth of practitioner research and secondly, the development of collaborative research.

Practitioner Research

In Europe and the US, the number of practitioner action research programmes is increasing. These programmes are typically part-time, where practising managers undertake action-oriented research in their own organisational systems (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). Coghlan et al. (2004) provide an example of the research work of three such programmes (two of which are doctoral).

Manager-researchers operate from the complete member role within their organisations and hence are embedded in the setting and working with knowledge-in-use, rather than acquired knowledge. They are practitioner-researchers in Jarvis' terms (1999) and typically undertake action research-/ action-learning-type projects. The challenges of such engagement in research and action in the complete member role are particular and generally involve learning to stand back from what is familiar and critique it, hold organisational and researcher roles concurrently and manage organisational politics (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). The outcome is actionable knowledge that contributes to both the academic and practitioner communities.

Collaborative Research

Collaborative research, as the term suggests, is an emerging action research approach to conducting inquiry in organisations, with the aim of "generating new insights that can simultaneously serve both action and the creation of new theoretical development" (Adler, Shani and Styhre, 2004: 359). One particular model that works from a collaborative research model between industry and academics is the FENIX doctoral programme in the Stockholm School of Economics and Chalmers University of Technology (Gothenberg). The FENIX approach is based on a partnership between industry and academics as stakeholders. Collaborative research, at the most basic level, attempts to refine the relationship between academic researchers and organisational actors from

research *on* or *for* to research *with*. In doing so, it attempts to integrate knowledge creation with problem solving and *inquiry from the inside* with *inquiry from the outside*.

- A partnership among a variety of individuals forming a "community of inquiry" within communities of practice.
- An emergent inquiry process that differs from the notion of scientific research as a closed, linear and planned activity.

Adler, Shani and Styhre (2004) provide a theoretical basis for collaborative research and present nine case studies in which external individual researchers worked in partnership with insider managers on issues of joint concern and knowledge generation. The FENIX programme as an inter-institutional and academic-industry partnership illustrates an exciting development in the field of doctoral research.

Conclusion

The construct of social science research is changing (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and it is changing under several dimensions:

- There is a growing concern about the gap between theory generated within university research and the world of the practising manager. Across several disciplines university-based research is perceived as becoming increasingly irrelevant. Hence there is a persistent call for research to address the world of practice and produce actionable knowledge. Developing forms such as practitioner and collaborative research are notable developments that address this concern.
- There is a growing engagement by the researcher as a person and the inclusion of reflexivity as a qualitative dimension of the relationship between the researcher and the researched, as contrasted with the detached objectivist stance of the positivist researcher.
- The development of trans-disciplinary research where research is a collaborative network venture between stakeholders with different perspectives and so that research is *with* rather than *on* people is opening up new possibilities.

These dimensions pose challenges to the traditional management doctorate where the individual selects a topic from an academic question and perceived gap in the literature, works individually to become the expert in the particular question and engages in isolated inquiry *on* organisational members as a detached, un-engaged outsider.

Action research as defined and practised has the capability to work with these dimensions. It has the potential to confront the self-perpetuating limitations that befall traditional research approaches and ultimately to open up new possibilities of doctoral research for industry and the world of business and

organisations. This reflection aims to provoke some discussion about the form doctoral programmes take and the role they play in generating actionable knowledge for and about Irish business and organisations.

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