Action Research a tool for Sustainable Development?

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Classical research is of necessity a long process. The time from formulation of a question to translation into practice of answers seldom takes less than a decade. The applicability of classical research to sustainable development – a matter of extreme urgency – can be called into question for this reason alone. However there are other reasons than speed for examining the possible role of Action Research in developing sustainability.

One such reason is that most (though not all) of the scientific and technical problems associated with sustainable development already have more or less adequate solutions. The key question is not how to make the science work, but how to make it work IN PRACTICE, on a wide scale: it is a political and behavioural problem of how to change mind-sets, attitudes, values and behaviours. In such areas, classical research methods are of limited use – see below.

Another reason is that sustainable development itself represents a paradigm shift, in the sense originally delineated by Kuhn. Such a shift pre-supposes the ability to 'catch sight of' one's assumptions. This is arguably easier in dialogue in a mixed group of researchers and practitioners. And in the sense that sustainable development is an evolutionary, open-ended process, action research presupposes that research objectives and methods will change according to the iterative application and experience of new research insights.

Researcher participation/practitioner research

Action Research is not a single phenomenon but rather a range of methods and approaches. What they have in common is the convergence of researcher and practitioner: researchers participate – in some measure – in the activity being studied, while practitioners contribute – in some measure – to the research.

In other words, the intention of an action researcher is not only to observe, study and describe but also to influence, change the course of events – and observe and record the results. Similarly, the intention of a practitioner in an action research project is not only to engage in an effective change process but also to learn from the process – and to contribute to an analysis that will permit others to learn from the process, too. To a greater or lesser extent, the 'object' of the research becomes a 'subject' (a methodological shift somewhat analogous to that demanded by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle for research into subatomic physics).

One may imagine the scope of Action Research on a scale from R(researcher)-dominated on the left to S(subject)-dominated on the right, where some of the 'stations' might be:

R◀					S
R offers	R responds	R intervenes	S develops	S engages in	S formulates
observations	to direct	/proposes	evaluation	continuous	research ques-
and analysis	questions		criteria	self-assessment	tions/hypotheses

Is it possible to research without influencing?

In the classical view of research, the ideal researcher is purely objective and has no relation or interaction with the object. Classical scientific methods intend to isolate single questions, pare away contextual influences and minimize potential subjectivity of the researcher. It may be questioned, however, whether such a pure approach is possible in any situation where the 'object' is a person (morally a peer) or a number of people; at the very least the researcher needs to be sensitive to her/his potential influence.

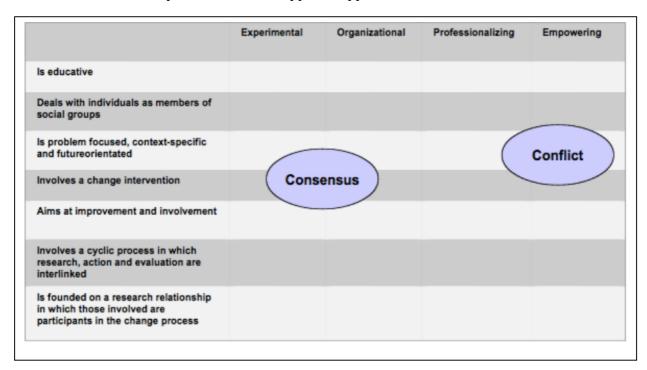
Different departure points for Action Research

A German social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is often credited with 'inventing' Action Research. He is quoted as saying that "In order to understand a social system one must change it," and "No research without action, no action without research".

Vikegård discerns two major types of Action Research, the 'northern tradition' and the 'southern tradition'.

- The Northern Tradition is here seen as pragmatic and utilitarian, including
 - A consensus view of society
 - Development of working life, strategies for management, leadership and employee participation
 - o The "practitioner" is often seen in a professional role
- ➤ The Southern Tradition is seen as ideological and political
 - o A conflict/protagonist view of society
 - o Development of society and of change processes, including a feministic branch
 - The "practitioner" can be anyone, from professionals to public, clients, patients, pupils

Hart and Bond (p. 37, 1995) take a different approach to defining Action Research. They describe seven necessary criteria and four types or applications.



Dual perspective

A general characteristic of action research is the need for the researcher to hold a dual perspective. S/he is at one and the same time an active participant *and* an observer and analyst. This may or may not also be true of the practitioners/subjects, depending on the approach chosen, but is of necessity true of the researcher. There is an analogy to the kind of psychotherapy where the therapist consciously enters into an active peer relationship with the patient/client and simultaneously needs to hold responsibility for the process.

Thus, the practitioner/subject may in principle take full responsibility for *evaluating* the course of events, including formulating research questions and criteria for success; but the researcher always retains overall responsibility for the broader analysis.

Some open questions

It could be claimed that all research concerned with people and their behaviour (and indeed also some other kinds of research) are of necessity "action research" – and would potentially benefit from a recognition of this fact, enabling the impact of the researcher *and* the insights of the practitioner to be included as parameters without jeopardizing scientific quality.

This is however not to propose that such inclusion is easy. There are many open (research?) questions on the topic of ensuring the quality of action research, including questions concerned with

- o Communication and dialogue
- o Involvement and distance
- o Connections and boundaries between 'facts', 'opinions' and 'feelings'

Who is doing action research today?

One of the areas most often mentioned in connection with action research is education/schools. In this arena a change process may be initiated by practitioners, who engage researchers to support them.

There seems at times to be some fuzziness between action research and Action Learning. A useful distinction is that Action Learning is something you do for yourself: I learn through action/experience, and through seeing the results of my actions.

Action research, on the other hand, is concerned with learning for the benefit of others. The experience and results must be replicable and transferable (offered, taught) to others not part of the original practitioner population.