
INSIDER ACTION RESEARCH: BEYOND PARTICIPATION IN ACTION RESEARCH

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In action research studies, participation is a core defining principle wherein the local members are engaged in learning about and the improvement of the larger system of which they are a part. In this paper, we report on the researchers experiences conducting insider action research in a business organization. There are recoverable insights from this research that extends the concept of local participation and researcher membership roles in the practice of action research studies in business organizations.

Introduction

Change projects are regarded by those they affect as very important during the period of the program – they have attention and focus, excitement and enthusiasm and are supported by significant resource allocations. However, change projects don't exist in a vacuum – they can be conceived as a 'system' of activities directed toward some purpose that occur in an 'environment', and are therefore are subject to changes in this extended environment. Systems theorists have been long aware of the concept of 'systems-in-environments' and open systems theory (von Bertalanffy 1950; Emery 1981) which is as a core principle behind achieving the fundamental cultural change required for a desirable future upon (Emery 1999).

Sustaining large-scale change is a significant challenge and therefore how to avoid a situation when the initial focus and interest fades away after an initial period of enthusiasm is an ongoing concern. This challenge (Olsen and Haslett 2002; Sarah, Haslett et al. 2002; Sarah and Haslett 2005; Sarah 2006) where the difficulties in sustaining change projects using action research has been outlined previously.

Based as part of an ongoing study based out of Monash University, this paper specifically focuses on one aspect of sustaining one category of action research – doing research in your own organization. This paper focuses on the role of insider action researchers (Coghlan and Brannick 2001; 2005) and how this unique positioning situation contributes to the durability of the research project. The proposition behind this paper is that durable change projects are a feature of successful change, and successful projects have the potential to be mutually reinforcing. It is this mutual reinforcement dynamic whereby local 'system'

solutions to problems can influence the system environment. As such, the focus of this paper is to explore how the positioning of the action researcher adds to successful local solutions that have the potential for replication in other places.

The Context

The case study that forms the basis of this paper is an organizational transformation of a student services organization at Monash University. This paper reports on one element of a model for linking a Masters Degree in Management as an employer-sponsored 'capability building program.' In this study, the primary author was employed at the beginning of the change program in an ongoing capacity as an action researcher engaged to write the history of the change program. Specifically, the paper discusses the positionality of the insider action researcher as a vital element for leveraging local change for whole system transformation. However, we begin with a brief overview of action research and the insider action researcher role before exploring the contribution to the literature from this case study.

Action Research

The origins of action research are at best problematic and writers suggest it is difficult to provide a coherent history of action research in the literature (Reason and Bradbury 2001). What is not in dispute is that action research as evolved significantly since its coined beginnings in the 1940's (Collier 1945; Lewin 1946) and while Lewin may not have been the first to use or advocate action research, however he was the first to develop a theory of action research as a 'research methodology' in the social sciences field. Lewin saw knowledge as something created from 'problem solving' in real-life situations (Lewin 1946; 1948) where the early action research studies, and those that it inspired, had an insistence on 'participation' as an important element of their development.

Some 60 years later, participation remains a central core feature of this major field of research that involves a cyclical process comprising a variety of activities and phases that integrate research and action in living systems (Coghlan and Brannick 2001; Reason and Bradbury 2001). *'A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge... a wider purpose (of action research) is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well being... of human persons and communities...'* (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p3). Clearly action research is a systems approach where members of the system work to improve their system.

Insider Action Research

Traditionally, action researchers were seen as outside change agents where the research was initiated by an outsider and a central issue was how to involve insiders in the research. This relationship between insiders and outsiders and the 'positionality' of the researcher is a part of the aforementioned evolving practice that is action research. Today, with the advent of professional managers who have acquired research skills enrolled in postgraduate programs, action research

is often done by organizational insiders who see it as a way to deepen their own reflection of practice toward problem-solving and professional development. One increasingly popular category of action research in business organizations is being performed by the insider-researcher.

Yet, doing field research inside organizations is not new. Adler and Adler (1987) describe three ideal-type membership roles in field research that reflect the degree of involvement in the study group:

- Peripheral membership;
- Active membership, and;
- Complete membership.

Their typology is categorized by membership affiliation where the differentiation point is the research role. Their topology is represented as a continuum. At the high end of the continuum – the complete member – are those researchers who become so committed to the group that they abandon their ties to the scientific/research community and fail to return from the field. At the time of their study, the ‘on-going’ insider was an exception to contemporary field research practice. Adler and Adler do however acknowledge a special case in their study – the opportunistic researcher (based on Riemer (1977) quoted in (Adler and Adler 1987)), where the researcher studies settings where they are already members. In contemporary literature, insider action researchers where are complete members, and ongoing employees of the host organization (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

This is what Monash embraced as the practitioner-scholar model - a model whereby professional practice is informed by scholarly inquiry. As a practitioner scholar, insider action researchers begin as practicing managers however the researcher and practitioner roles may become one and the same.

Insider-Outsider Continuum

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) discuss several important aspects of doing action research in your own organization. These three aspects are positioned as differentiating insider action researchers from outsider action researchers and represent different dynamics for the Action Researcher. We briefly summarize the literature on these three aspects highlighting important and unique insights not specifically covered in the literatures.

Pre-understanding: The notion of pre-understanding of the setting is thought to be a unique advantage for the inside action researcher where their prior immersion in the setting provides valuable insights and knowledge about cultures and informal structures of the host (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, p 61). In this sense they are an ‘insider-inside’ the host organization. However, prior immersion is thought to create a challenge in terms of the capacity to observe the unfolding of the cycles of action, learning and reflection.

The researcher who joins the organization as a temporary member not only has the political and cultural challenge of negotiating access to the orga-

nization and data, but to understanding the culture and history of the research setting. In this sense, they are an 'outsider-inside' the host organization. The challenge then is a lack of pre-understanding.

In this case study however, the researcher's role can be thought to lie between these two dimensions. The researcher was a new employee, contracted for permanent on-going employment. Therefore the researcher would be categorized as an insider. But as a new employee, without prior exposure to the culture and history of the setting, the researcher was still an outsider. In this sense, they were an 'outside-insider' in the host organization.

This third position is therefore somewhat unique – in that being inside the organization you have physical access but being a recent arrival, the pre-understanding level is the same as the outsider-inside. However, due to the absence of a closeness to the issues and organization, otherwise unrecognized assumptions and norms are more easily identifiable (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, p63).

Access: The literature on insider action research makes a distinction between primary and secondary access. Primary access is the ability to get into the organization and be allowed to undertake research (Coghlan and Brannick 2005, p 67). As an organizational member, an inside action researcher has primary access. In regard to 'secondary access', this refers to access to specific parts of the organization and information that are relevant to the research (op cit p 67).

Much of the literature refers to 'physical' membership. However, this is only one dimension of membership. Another element of membership relates to psychological and social membership of the organization and the dynamics surrounding this.

An insider action researcher does not have a detached interest in the research setting or topic and therefore is denied some of the detachment of the outsider. It is then a risk for the insider that they are likely to encounter elements of the research that are frustrating if not distasteful and that may lead to degrees of alienation because of being deeply connected to the research and the research setting. As an organizational member, there is genuine commitment to the organization as host and to the group as co-researchers and collaborators.

Role Duality: The literature reports a challenge of adding a research role to a pre-existing organizational role. My role, as a new role and as a new member, was a practitioner-scholar who was both doing an organizational project and a PhD research project as two co-joined cycles of project work. I was simultaneously producing results and generating knowledge for the organization community and results and knowledge for the academic community. This dynamic is similar to concept of a core project and a thesis project (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt 1992; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002). The 'complete member' inside action researcher role also brings to the researcher legitimacy with their fellow organizational members. The legitimacy is in respect of internal acceptance as an ongoing member and status as employee that creates an initial connection. In comparison, an outsider has to negotiate the organizational boundary established between employees and non-employees, the organization.

	Research Description	Pre-understanding	Access	Role
Outsider-Inside (Traditional Field Researcher)	Traditional external coming inside to conduct research	None	Political challenge	External role dominates where the researcher will withdraw from the study and return to a prior membership organisation
Insider-Inside (Inside Action Researcher)	Insider Action Researcher who is already a permanent on-going employee	Yes due to historical lived experiences in the organisation.	Access assumed due to employment engagement	Role clarity (but proposed as an IAR that his will develop into practitioner-scholar)
Outside-Insider (sub-category of Inside Action Researcher)	The new inside action researcher who seeks to have an ongoing employment/ career relationship with the host organisation	None	Access assumed due to employment engagement	Role clarity (but proposed as an IAR that his will develop into practitioner-scholar)

Table 1 *Insider-Outsider Continuum*

The above can be summarized in the following table with a new sub-category of insider action researcher – the outsider inside. :

As the inside action researcher moves beyond participation, we can also summarize the dynamics of engagement in the following mutually reinforcing causal feedback description (see figure 1 below):

The researcher, as an engaged member of the host organization, increasingly does ‘member work’ that is core to the host organization. This leads to the researcher taking on the obligations and commitments of the member of the organization, further reinforcing their engagement as a member. This feedback loop is show as R1 in figure 1.

As an engaged member, undertaking member work, you also gain access to ‘secret information’, and possession of this information is known only to members. This is a privilege and increases the obligations and commitments of and to the host organization, and further reinforces the membership status of the researcher. This feedback loop is shown as R2 in figure 1.

Recommended Practice

We have demonstrated that the positionality of the researcher in undertaking an action research study in their own organization is increasingly important. Inside action researchers, as practicing managers, or as practitioner-scholars have three duties where we need to seek active membership roles to sustain our local practice.

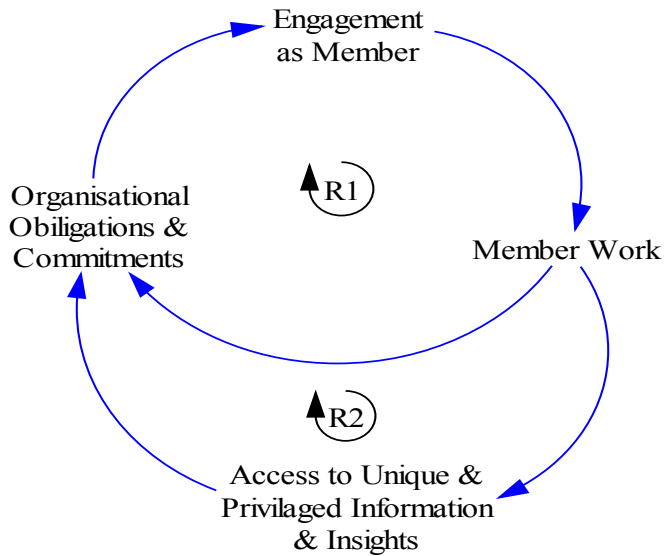


Figure 1 *Dynamics of Insider Action Research Engagement*

We need to build a role for our research in our organizations as a core element of legitimizing the new work of practice scholarship. Our own experiences, emotions and therefore our interpretations and constructions are equally important in the knowledge creation process. As the researcher, it is we who eventually decide what is reported and what is not. Indeed, Checkland and Holwell (1998) implore us to declare in advance our framework of ideas in any research setting. To do otherwise is mere story telling and findings at best are anecdotal (p14).

We need to create learning communities inside the organization where we can communicate our work. This is the true essence of cogeneration of knowledge and action. The creation of learning organizations provides an infrastructure for inside action researchers and practitioner scholars to generate knowledge from the local solution to the wider global community. It is an integration of first, second and third-person action inquiry (Reason and Torbert 2001; Torbert 2001) that compliments Reason and Marshall's popular notion of three audiences for research – for me, for us and for them (1987). This is how the local solutions can shape and influence the larger system.

Insider-Action Researchers on the Outside

The literatures focus on pre-understanding, access and role duality for the insider action researcher. What about the insider action researcher who suddenly finds themselves on the 'outside' before their core thesis project research is completed? In concluding this paper, we will briefly report on what happens when rather than withdrawing from the field of study, the field of study was withdrawn from the researcher. I explore my recent experience of employment separation from the host organization (and the organizations subsequent winding up) and my adaptation of to a new role of the insider action researcher on the outside.

In this part of the paper, as it was personal to the primary author, it is written in the first person from their perspective.

1. Separation: While the engagement dynamics were unique to this setting, the disengagement was not what I had expected. Having identified myself as an insider researcher, I saw this as an enduring role. This had been reinforced by the research sponsor and CEO and we had already begun scoping the post-doctoral study. Thus, with no ongoing membership, the role identity with the group and/or host ceased. After over 30 years of full-time work, I could talk the talk of a full-time PhD student finalizing his research thesis, but the walking the talk by just writing the writing was much more challenging.
2. Community: In their introduction to the Handbook of Action Research, Reason and Bradbury (2001) acknowledge the intimate relationship between knowledge and power and in action research studies. Knowledge creation is a political process, just as undertaking any research activity in any organization is a political act (Punch 1994). Doing research in your own organization is particularly political. It also has an ethical dimension. I have a strong commitment to, and self-identification with, the workgroup that for 5 years were my colleagues and co-researchers. Upon separation, I experienced a challenge in portraying the research 'appropriately'. I didn't want to feel that my final thesis report would be biased because of my personal trauma of separation or to feel I was misrepresenting my colleagues and our study in anyway.
3. Writing the research: As an inside action researcher on the outside, the challenge of extracting something to say out of 5 years of data seems herculean as much as it was incomprehensible. Where and how do you start? For six months, I started and restarted, pick-up, put down, read, re-read, copied, took more notes, took notes of the notes and summaries of the summaries, until finally it clicked. The story is the story – it is what happened as I interpreted it through my experiences. The blindingly obvious became obvious - insider action research is a subjectivist methodology in that it employs subjective means to study subjective phenomenon. The insider on the outside was a six month distraction.

Conclusion

Conducting insider action research is more than participation – it is beyond participation. It is a highly personal approach that requires emotions and intimacy, traits that aren't always acknowledged in the world of business. And while insider action research literature is written from a single 'researcher' perspective, it is collaborative and depends on mutual support and respect from your professional and academic colleagues. When these requirements are met, insider action research is transformative.

Insider action research changes the researcher and the organization of which they are a part – therefore *caveat emptor*, let the 'insider researcher' beware:

- That being inside is more than physical access – it is an emotional standpoint;
- That research is not just an add-on to another role but can change the practicing manager role to a practitioner-scholar;
- The practitioner-scholar who produces knowledge for the community is part of the dynamic of leveraging local solutions in a wider organizational (if not societal) environment;
- That in any longer term action research change program expect the unexpected, anticipate the unanticipated, and embrace both since it is from these novel and surprising events that deep insights and transformational knowledge and learning can emerge.

Yet counter-intuitively, it is this emotional dimension of insider action research that provides the drive and energy to sustain local level action research based knowledge creation and learnings that when successful, beget further success. Insider action research can be one of the elements of creating the positive reinforcing feedback that is essential if local solutions are to have any impact in the larger system of which they are a part.

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