

Action Research Call for Papers

Special issue – Theory in Action Research

The recent popularity of action research has spawned a wide range of approaches to this form of inquiry that not only differ in their research processes, but have underlying differences in the theoretical and philosophical assumptions on which they are based. Originally enacted as a social change process by Lewin (1946), action research is now applied in a range of arenas for a variety of different purposes. For some, social change is still a central tenet of their application of this form of inquiry. For others the focus is on the generation of theory to be added to the existing body of knowledge that is the purview of the academic world. Yet another group focuses on action research in a more pragmatic vein, seeing it as a means to achieve effective outcomes for a particular group of people.



A central concern of all, however, and a continuing problematic, is the place of theory in action research. For some, theory represents a foundational body of knowledge that provides the basis for modern social life, the development of which is the fundamental purpose of scholastic endeavour. From this perspective, theory building is the central purpose of research, and the process often commences by situating itself within a particular theoretical context. For others, academic theory is 'just' another set of understandings through which to view the world, and it stands alongside of the understandings built into the fabric of social life. The pre-eminent purpose is to achieve social change or effective pragmatic outcomes, and although academic theory may be incorporated, research processes are primarily situated within the systems of knowledge inherent in the research context.

These are contested areas, since they challenge the fundamental precepts upon which academic life has been built. They do not only impact on the field of action research, however, since postmodern, critical and feminist discourses and consequent developments in qualitative research lead directly to similar fundamental philosophical and theoretical debates. Issues of epistemology, ontology and methodology have long been subject to intellectual and scholarly analyses that are challenged by recent developments in thought around action research.

The diverse approaches to action research have built in implicit assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of the processes by which we gain and use knowledge. Theory therefore becomes a central area of concern, since different sets of assumptions will lead in different directions, with consequent implications for method.

The purpose of this special edition, therefore, is to tease out and clarify the differing assumptions built into the diverse approaches that now constitute the action research landscape, and to explore the resulting practices. It will therefore address the place of theory in action research, exploring suitable topics that might include: the role of theory and understanding in action research; the forms taken by theory in action research; practical processes for building theory and understanding; the relationship between tacit understanding and explicit theory; ways of engaging participants in reaching collective understanding or explicit theory; and the value of local theory and its generalizability or transferability.

In the first instance, proposals of about 600 to 800 words are solicited. These should describe clearly the proposed approach, explain the contribution that would be made to the journal issue and to action research generally, and identify what readers will gain. **Proposals must be submitted by September 31, 2007, to Bob Dick, bd@uqconnect.net.**

From these proposals, guest editors will invite selected authors to submit full articles for review. In making their selection, guest editors will favour proposals which offer a high quality conceptual or practical contribution (and preferably both) to the topic of generating theory and understanding in action research studies. In addition, preference may be given to proposals which:

- are likely to be useful to academics and practitioners who are interested in improving their ability, and the ability of other participants, to generate theory and understanding
- integrate theory and practice
- are accessible to people who may not understand action research jargon
- offer a useful new perspective on the place of theory in action research
- complement the other papers in the special issue.

The guest editors are Chris Huxham (University of Strathclyde), Ernie Stringer (Curtin University) and Bob Dick (Southern Cross University). **The special issue is planned for Volume 7(1), final copy date October 2008, to be published in March 2009.**

Reference

Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34–46.