

CREATING ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE: REFLECTIONS OF AN ACTION RESEARCH COHORT

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Abstract

The paper reflects on the experience of a cohort of Action Research practitioners involved in a learning set at Monash University. The paper defines the context of the group's previous academic background, discusses the use of metaphors in the process of sense making, examines the organisational experiences of the cohort and proposes a model for practice-based doctoral programs.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the reflections of an Action Research cohort, working as a learning set concerned with "creating actionable knowledge". The paper describes a University-based project involving Action Research in a range of government, NFP and private organisations. The aim of project is the development and translation of management theory into the world of action. The first underlying assumption of our work is that there is a nexus between theory and action that is dynamic and on-going. It is a function of the university to create the knowledge for this connection and that this should be "recoverable" (Checkland and Howell, 1998). The second assumption is that the body of theory that supports this work is developed communally and that the learning set is pivotal to this development. A number of important elements in the development of the group are reported here to provide some markers on the roadway for others involved in a similar journey.

In setting the context of this paper, the following introduces the members of the Monash University Action Research Cohort.

John Molineux is a human resource practitioner with the Australian Taxation Office. He has been involved as a researcher, adviser, project mentor and coordinator for the implementation of a large-scale HR-based change project. In the later phases of the project, he was a HR strategist and a human resource manager.

Jane Olsen spent the first two years of AR as a senior manager in a large Australian based financial organization attempting to guide teams through the strategic management process using an action research methodology. Her first project involved developing strategic intent in a global business, the second the second the implementation of small-scale opportunities to generate tangible bottom line benefits. This second operational program was highly successful, identifying valuable opportunities and generating almost \$7m in benefits. The third phase involved designing and implementing strategic plans with a leadership team composed of General Managers from five constituent businesses. Jane is now a director of a consulting company.

Rod Sarah's AR project study was developing the capability of the organization to explore "over-the – horizon" scenario planning technologies in Corporate Planning division of a large Government organisation. On changing organisations, he was able to re-start his AR work in a new subject field with a new organisation, focusing on building capabilities for organisational learning.

John Stephens has conducted his research in his role of CEO of two different but related NFP organizations. He has conducted two phases of his work in each organization. The first two phases involved working towards a "change of mindset" for the Board of Directors. The second two phases involved the development of a Viable Systems Model on an organization wide basis.

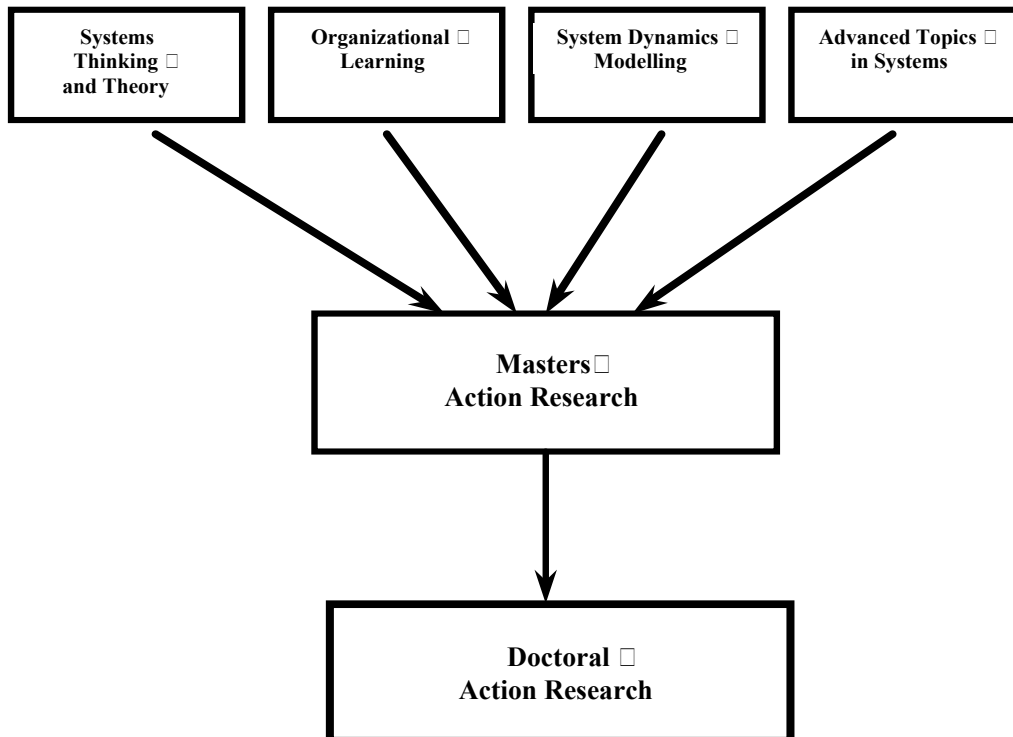
Bev Walker has worked in a not-for-profit community organisation that had a 25-year history of providing mutual support and advocacy for people with a mental illness and their families. The organisation had recently undertaken an organisation review and developed a strategic directions document. The three year action research developed the processes for the structural transition of the organisation where the voluntary and membership functions became integrated; the Board assumed its governance and leadership role and the CEO and managers assumed responsibility for the operational management of the organisation.

DEFINING THE LEARNING CONTEXT

The traditional model for PhD research in Australia is the full-time progression from Honours to PhD with the student taking an apprenticeship role (Yeatman, 1995). Burnett (1999) developed the Collaborative Cohort Model (CCM) as a solution for problems arising from the traditional apprenticeship/supervision model. This model involves students with common research interests working together rather than individually. While this model has the potential to work with part-time students, it does not address the problems that arise with a lack of a common disciplinary background within the cohort. For there to be an ongoing commitment to a cohort, there needs to be a commonality, not only of methodology and intellectual background, but also of social intent (Haslett et al, 2002). The Monash program has been fortunate in having developed a common intellectual background in an earlier degree program.

The ongoing work of this PhD program has grown out of the Master of Organisational Systems at Monash University. All members of the cohort have completed this program. This has established a significant base of common theory amongst the group. The main aspects of this programme are shown in Figure 1. A Master of Organizational Systems Degree is awarded for completion of the action research project (Haslett et al 2002).

Figure 1: Program Structure



Clearly this exercise falls within the experiential framework defined by Kolb (1984) and described in Figure 2. At a practice level, participants have employed Lewin's experiential learning model as described in Figure 3 and as articulated in Checkland and Howell's (1998) Framework-Methodology-Area of action (FMA) approach (Figure 4).

Figure 2: Experiential Framework (Source: Kolb, 1984:4)

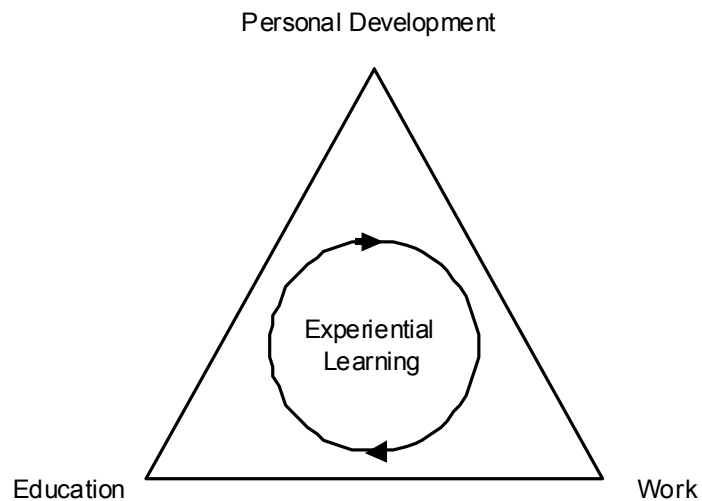


Figure 3: Lewin's Experiential Learning Model. (Source: Kolb, 1984: 21)

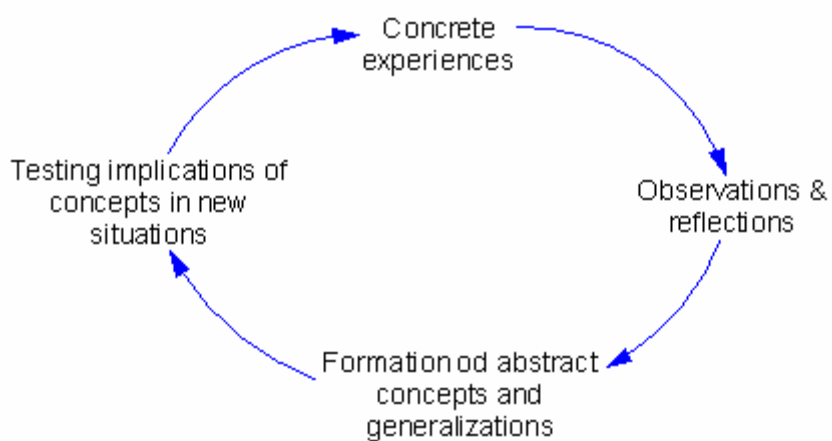
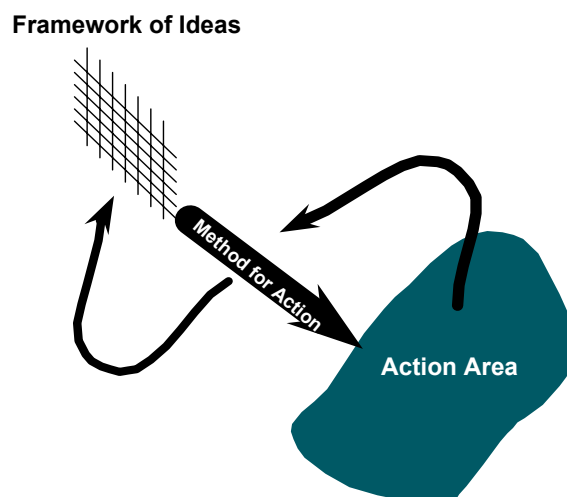


Figure 4: Checkland & Howell's FMA Approach



Flood (2001) argued that System Dynamics, Soft Systems Methodology, Critical Systems Thinking, Total Systems Intervention and Complexity Theory were necessary pre-requisites for conducting AR. Such a body of theory provides a series of central theoretical constructs for practitioner reflection during the learning cycles. Members of the cohort have drawn heavily on this theoretical background during their projects. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Bev Walker: As a problem solving method SAST is used in situations where the policy-making is complex and where the problems and issues are inter-related and “messy” (Flood & Jackson, 1991, p. 122; Mason & Mitroff, 1981). SAST was used to focus attention on the differing assumptions about organisational membership held by the participant managers. The problem context was perceived by the researcher to be simple-pluralist in nature and was underpinned by the culture and political dynamics in the organisation (Flood and Jackson, 1991). As a result of the SAST session organisation membership was clarified and a range of other stakeholders identified and defined.

John Molineux: Checkland’s FMA structure was an important framework. As a result of reflection on the abolition of the implementation projects that I was working on, it became obvious that the framework ideas involved in this research needed to be re-thought. It was at this point that the theory of punctuated equilibrium (Tushman and Romanelli, 1985) became apparent. This theory explained the macro-cycles involved in organizational change, and enabled the researcher to explore the causal factors in change over 25 years of the organisation’s history. Results from this discovery are reported in Molineux and Haslett (2002).

Susanne Tepe: I found the concepts of Viable Systems Models and Diagnostics (Beer, 1985) very valuable while designing a system for information sharing. The process of having the system accepted by assisted by having a robust FMA that included organizational learning theory.

Rod Sarah: There are two fundamental theories that I’d draw on – and they are both related. One is ‘nested systems’ and AR being nested in organisational systems, and the other one is the framing of viable action research in the context of VSM and AR as a viable system with clockspeeds in Systems 3-2-1 and 3-4-5 (and between the Meta-system and its environment). Jane has picked this up in her tidal waves and Siberian winters. The argument in the 2002 paper (Sarah et. al.) offered a counter intuitive insight that research to date suggested that it may be more important to finish a cycle of action research that coincides with the organisational clock-speed even if some element of quality is compromised in the short term. It can be more important to finish good work than to continue great work. This links back to value for the host organisation.

John Stephens: Two ideas that I found particularly helpful when the cycle plan had ostensibly failed were the behavioural characteristics including Double Loop Learning and defence mechanisms (Argyris, 1982, 1993) and Ashby’s (1956) requisite variety to explain the inaction connected with the research. This inaction is well explained by Drucker, (1997) Ruggles and Holtshouse, (1999) Flood and Jackson, (1995) and ideas on how we approach ‘learning within an unknowable’ (Flood, 1999). I found Bateson’s (1973) Conscious-Competence model useful for understanding the progress that the Action Researcher and his colleagues go through.

DEVELOPING THE METAPHORS

The common intellectual background was the base for defining a series of metaphors that became one of the emergent properties of the group. Metaphors provided a developing framework for sense-making of common experience. As argued earlier, the shared knowledge was highly contextual and at this stage in the development of this process, it is impossible to say whether

these actual metaphors themselves, will be recoverable. It is also not certain whether other groups will produce defining metaphors or whether this is a function of the specific background of this group. What can be suggested with some confidence is that the defining of these metaphors represents actionable knowledge for this group.

In his book, *Images of Organization*, Gareth Morgan writes:

" metaphors persuade us to see, understand, and imagine situations in partial ways.....metaphors create insight....distort...have strengths (and) limitations. In creating ways of seeing they tend to create ways of *not* seeing. The challenge facing modern managers is to become accomplished in the art of using metaphor: To find appropriate ways of seeing, understanding and shaping the situations with which they have to deal."
(pg 348)

An extensive literature exists on the role of metaphor in the organizational context. (Cornelissen, 2003, Putnam & Fairhurst, 2000; Grant and Osrick, 1996; Marshak, 1996; Smith and Eisenberg, 1987; Dunford and Palmer, 1986; Pondy, 1983, Morgan, 1980.) Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argued that metaphors provide coherence by uniting reason and imagination and placed metaphors between myth and independent shared reality. They link the use of archetypes patterns and metaphor as means for describing and understanding organizational cultures and for interpreting symbolic meaning. In support of this view, they cite Dandridge (1985), Deal and Kennedy (1982), Krefling and Frost (1985), Mitroff (1983), Morgan (1980, 1986), Nonaka (1994) and Tsoukas (1993).

Developing metaphors has become a central, defining and conscious process for the cohort and began initially as a response to the demands of a university doctoral program. As part of the process of a doctoral research program, all members of the cohort have been required to formulate their research within the context of defining hypotheses and research questions, ethics clearances, progress reports, and identifying research participants. In addition, it was necessary to deal with the exigencies of being the first action research proposals within the Faculty. These requirements led to a strong focus on the practicalities of the projects and this provided the first common task for the group. The cohort struggled with the requirement of having clearly defined research proposals set in concrete while knowing, as a result of earlier research at Masters level, that the projects would be subject to the change and flux of the organizations in which they worked. It was during this period that the metaphor processes for the cohort began to develop.

Faced with the need to develop clearly defined research proposals, the cohort began defining why it thought that the research problems articulated in these proposals were likely to be transient. The first and most obvious reason was that the research problems were likely to change as the organisational demands on the researchers changed. The cohort used the metaphor of the journey to describe what they saw at the beginning of the project. "You may start at A and think you are going to B. However, you are more likely to wind up at J."

Underlying the development of these metaphors are the ideas of non-linearity and discontinuity inherent in Chaos Theory and Complexity Theory, areas with which all members of the cohort were familiar. In particular, two ideas, from chaos and complexity theory, helped shape these metaphors. The first was the idea of sensitivity to initial conditions (Lorenz, 1972, 1993) where small changes in any systems state can lead to the development of unpredictable system paths.

The second was the idea of the fitness landscape of the organisation where the adaptive agents compete on a dynamic and multi-dimensional landscape which is shaped by the external environment and by the actions of the agents themselves (Kauffman, 1983, 1989). The manner in which the action researcher responds to, and develops that landscape, provided a useful metaphor for making sense of the nature of research in a changing and dynamic environment.

During this early development of the cohort much of the initial focus was on the “what sort of change are we attempting?” issues. At first, the discussions within the group were disparate, fragmented and highly contextual, as the work of six individual “practitioner-scholars” necessarily is. During one of the reflection sessions on the cohorts progress, it was suggested that the cohort think again about Checkland’s (1985, 1991) FMA model which defines AR in terms of Framework of Ideas, Methodology and Area Of Application. The group recognised that the cohort discussions had shifted from the initial questions of “what are we going to do?” to “ how do we deal with?” and then on to “why do we think about it like that?” These questions reflect that in the early stages, the group was clearly focussed on the A of FMA, namely the area of Application. As the cohort has evolved and the projects have moved on, more time has been spent discussing AR methodology and the Framework of Ideas.

The use of this model was the first example of a series of defining metaphors by which the cohort made sense of their work. Throughout the work of the cohort this proved to be a powerful guiding metaphor as it provided a model for understanding the relative position of issues in the AR process. This was particularly helpful in the early stages when there had necessarily been little opportunity for reflection and the groups activities were defined in the context of preparing the area of application. As the work continued, the cohort meeting would move between elements of F,M and A but the most productive sessions were those spent on the Framework of Ideas.

One such move occurred when the cohort members reframed their studies from Projects to be managed to Journey to be undertaken. As reported in Sarah et al (2002), one of the cohort members reflected:

Over two cycles of intervention, neither of which worked well, I realised that rather than thinking about the interventions in terms of ‘it didn’t work’, I began to focus on what did we potentially learn... what could be done better... what did work... It was a shift from ‘right and wrong’ to ‘learning’.

For a PhD candidature and a thesis must have a beginning and an ending. Similarly, organisations frequently viewed the research topics as a project – with similar notions of beginnings and endings. Yet, we intuitively knew that an action researcher always starts in the middle of something since an action researcher views the world as continuous. Where ever we start and however we conceptualise the beginning of our intervention, it is helpful to conceptualise our work in terms that the reflective cycles help to readjust direction, and that this emergence is the natural outcome of taking action.

The cohort reflected that this is most likely the result of the paradigm in the organisation and the university. The formal adoption of the FMA framework, and specifically the explicit revisiting our ‘frameworks’ (F) provides insight to make these shifts and accommodations on pragmatic grounds of sustainability and viability. Despite our history of having confronted some of these challenges previously as Masters students, making the shift and maintaining the shifts from ‘starts and finishes’ to ‘journeys’ difficult.

THE PUBLICATION PROCESS

The cohort describes themselves as “practitioner-scholars” involved in journeys across shifting landscapes. This has been central to the commitment of the group to document the progress of the research through a series of publications and conference papers. To date, the cohort has produced over 30 refereed publications and conference papers. This work is indicative of the concern of the group that even in the specifics of a workplace project there are themes that are generalisable, actionable and replicable which contribute to the realm of academic knowledge (Checkland and Howell, 1998).

There are two challenges for practitioner-scholars wishing to create actionable knowledge. The first is for the scholar to create coherence from the disparate, fragmented and highly contextual nature of practice while the second is for the practitioner to base their actions in a recognizable theoretical paradigm. Checkland and Howell (1998) claim that for AR to be valid requires a recoverable research process based upon a prior declaration of the epistemology in terms of which findings which count as knowledge will be expressed. For this group, acknowledging the contextual perspective of the research and coming from different lived experiences, the idea of recoverability drives the need for generalization and transferability of the results coming from these individual projects.

THE ORGANISATIONS AND THE PRACTITIONER-SCHOLARS

When the cohort first formed, four of the researchers had permanent full-time employment with the reasonable expectation that this would continue for the duration of the AR project. This group would be described as doing “insider” research (Coghan & Brannick, 2001). Two researchers were doing “outsider” research as consultants on the AR project. Of the insider group, only one (John Molineux) continues working in the original organization and even he has undergone a number of significant changes and alterations to the original project.

Jane Olsen developed the metaphor of “Tidal waves and Siberian winters” to define and understand the process where the project appear to falter. Organizational tidal waves, in the form of major restructures, strategic redirection or downsizing have swept a number of projects away, leaving the researcher clinging to the wreckage. These changes have profound implications for AR projects as part of PhD programmes where some sense of continuity is necessary.

This was a significant issue for John Stephens when he moved from the Sandown Greyhound Racing Club to become the CEO of Greyhound Racing Victoria. He wished to continue his AR work in his new role and while the new job created a new and different sets of challenges, he decided that he would take his "Action Research mind-set" with him. In discussing John's transition, the cohort began defining the metaphor of the Action Research mind-set as a continuous and cumulative process. The focus of the group shifted at this point from seeing AR as operating in an area of application in a specific organisation to a framework of ideas, values and beliefs held by the action researcher. Action research is increasingly seen as the way we work – a way of being.

This metaphor provided a context for members of the cohort to conceptualize their work as independent of the organisation in which they were working. The connecting thread between organisations became the work of the action researcher. This also shifted the focus to what was "recoverable" from the old organizational setting and applicable to the new.

Many of the members of the cohort have experienced "Siberian winters" where all signs of AR life appeared to have gone into hibernation, if not died completely. The metaphor for survival of Siberian winters became one of sowing seeds as widely as possible. The Siberian winters metaphor evolved later in John Molineux's work on punctuated equilibrium (Molineux and Haslett, 2002) and the winters work seen in the light of organisation cycle time (Sarah et. al. 2002). The number of cohort members found that Siberian winters do end and with the thaw work can begin again. Significantly, this work is often done by people who were involved in action research activities before the winter. The Siberian winters metaphor is perhaps the cohort's best example of the manner in which a metaphor can make sense and frame a set of experiences.

THE MODELS FOR DEVELOPING AR COHORTS

Figure 5: The relationship between the university and the work environment

Figure 5 shows the relationship between universities and the organisations in the AR.

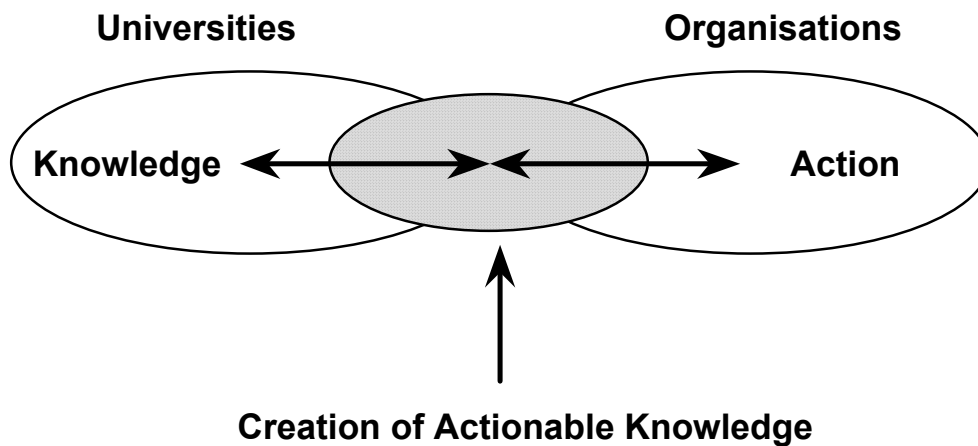


Figure 5 is based on two relatively simple but generalized notions. The first is that universities are concerned with knowledge and organisations are concerned with action. The second is that there is common ground between the two but that it is a domain that is relatively unexplored, in part, as a result of the traditional definition of the role of a University in the learning process. Traditionally, students come from their organisations to learn in the University context. Often assignments will be "work based", however any transfer of learning either into the University or the organization, is serendipitous rather than managed. Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002) note that there is conflict in "the different perspectives of the organisation and the researcher", essentially "making two projects – one around the researcher's concerns and the other around the organisational problem".

The Monash cohort has worked to develop this domain as the domain for action research. There are some given structures in terms of the degree of formality and structure in the arrangement. From the organisations' point of view, the projects are a formal part of the practitioner-scholar's job specifications. From the university's point of view, the projects constitute a formal requirement for the completion of a doctoral degree. This interface has proved neither symmetrical nor particularly easy to manage. The formalization of the structure has two benefits, first the organisations expect results and second that University expects a contribution to knowledge. However, this does not imply any necessary cooperative effort between the two. This produces a creative tension in the work of the members of cohort: their work must be valuable in the world of action and publishable in the world of knowledge. The constant question is: "Is your work valuable within the organization and significant within the University?"

John Molineux comments,

"I think the balance is heavily weighted in the organisation's favour. It is the lack of power, particularly in large organizations, that the researcher has in controlling the organizational application of the research. The value to the organization of the work probably needs to be more clearly articulated. If it is of value and use in the organization, then it should also be of use in the action research world. I think the emphasis should be on the application in the organization rather than the university research."

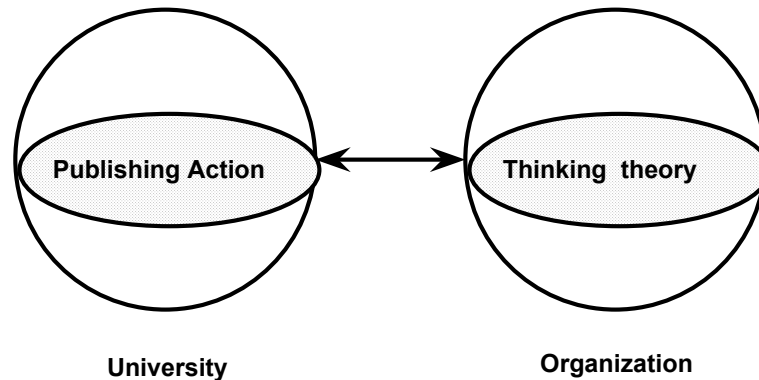
Rod Sarah comments,

"The work must be valuable to both constituencies – it is how 'value' is defined. For organisations, it is solving a problem or problematic situation and its value is in terms of its

usability to meet a predetermined need. For Universities, it is about contribution to knowledge judged by peer assessment including presentation to conferences, publication to journals and for our group, confirmation of formal qualification.”

Figure 6: The requisite variety relationship

Figure 6 is a subset of Figure 1 in which the universities and organisations create internal structures that replicate those of their partner.



Variety refers to the number of possible states (Ashby, 1956). According to Ashby’s law of requisite variety, systems can only be ‘controlled’ if the would be controller can command the same degree of variety of the system. Action research projects and the business environments in which they operate are complex and subject to rapid fluctuation. To control such systems, AR’ers need to increase their own variety or reduce the variety to the system in what they find themselves. The experience of the AR cohort is that robust systems are needed to weather such fluctuations.

Ashby’s (1956) Law of Requisite Variety suggests that there needs to be a “mirror” organizational structure to deal with this relationship. It is suggested that this mirror structure should be recursive. The interconnectivity and recursive nature of the format is suggested by a central Beer metaphor - the principle of ‘a set of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, wherein each is contained within the next’ (Beer, 1979 p118). This metaphor suggests that the variety of the organizations and the university needs to be attenuated by recursive and reciprocal structures.

Requisite variety is central to making this model work. Each of the partners in this relationship need to have formal structures that make it possible for them to interact and negotiating with the other partner.

ORGANISATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURES FOR ACTION RESEARCH

The Action Research topics that make up the body of case studies of the cohort provide insights into the role that structures play in the sustainability of the research over time. They provide some pointers to the necessary infrastructure needed to sustain action research studies.

CASE 1: The requisite structures established in the host organisations have proved an interesting point of difference between the projects. At one end of the scale, the structures established at Monyx, where Rod Sarah has been working, have been the closest to those established within the cohort at Monash University. A group of 25 drawn from Senior Leadership Teams and including the CEO are completing a Masters degree very similar to that of the PhD cohort. The degree includes five Action Research projects which are tied closely to business outcomes. It is expected that 4-5 members of this group will proceed to doctoral research with a focus on Action Research. In addition, a large number of practices

arising from Systems Thinking, Action Research and Organisational Learning have been established within the organisation. Rod Sarah has served as mentor and coordinator for this programme. It is anticipated that these structures will create the residual capability and ensure the successful completion of the program in Monyx and that the Systems Thinking/Action Research/Organisational Learning will become embedded in the organisation.

CASE 2: At Greyhound Racing Victoria, John Stephens established slightly different requisite structures. The application of a modified version of Beer's Viable Systems Model was used to structure a process designed to handle litigation in relation to a range of illegal activities in the industry. This process was extended over an 18-month period and characterised by regular reflection sessions conducted by John. In addition, the VSD model was used across the organization to develop the corporate strategic plan.

John Stephens comments: I think that my enthusiasm to promote org learning, any learning, is providing the Requisite Variety. As an organization, we have become 'smarter than'. Two issues that I have found (1) that unless those you are guiding 'have a certain level of competence' then it is very difficult (2) as the org grows and the competencies develop, I find us growing away from the 'industry participants' we are managing. In some ways this is the Conant/Ashby Law of Residual Variety – as you (the organization) gets smarter, that is you obtain the required requisite variety, residual variety says you have to work harder at bringing the other (less competent) along.

CASE 3: Bev Walker worked over three-year period with the senior management group, including the CEO, of a NFP organisation. The work involved regular session of learning and reflection as the group implemented the new strategic plan for the organisation. As well as this, this work involved the development of a group whose focus had often been primarily clinical to a focus on managerial and strategic issues.

CASE 4: John Molineux's work serves as an interesting contrast and comparison. His work was similarly "mission-critical" and had the support, but not the participation, of the CEO and senior executive. His organisation had a long history of involvement in Systems Thinking and Systems Methodologies. This long history, however, had not resulted in ongoing and formal structures that continued the use of these on methodologies. Rather, it had a number of people interspersed throughout the organisation who had expertise in, and commitment to, the methodologies. John's research was characterised by more tidal waves, Siberian Winters and discontinuities than the previous three projects.

CASE 5: Susanne Tepe conducted her work in the Australian Defence Force where she worked as a consultant and began working towards establishing a process for developing Beer's Viable Systems Model as the basis for policy development in occupational health safety. To do this, she developed an informed and supportive of group of senior military officers. Her Siberian winter occurred as a result of Defence Force policy of tri-annual rotation of all senior officers. This effectively wiped out her support group before she could establish the necessary structures to implemented her plan.

CASE 6: Jane Olson developed the metaphor of tidal waves and Siberian winters as a result of relatively disconnected activities of her Action Research project. The research work was characterised by three unrelated projects where Jane used action research methodology to develop the strategic capabilities of a large organisation. Unlike the previous projects, there was no senior management commitment to establishing Action Research methodologies within the organisation and consequently no requisite structures to ensure that the programme had ongoing viability.

Jane Olson comments: In many respects I don't think the organization was much interested in the theory either. Certainly a comment made in one of my interviews was a reliance on

theory or making it more explicit, spelt organizational death. I was often referred to quite disparagingly as the academic in a white lab coat. So I think this may make for yet another issue as an AR practitioner.

The similarity between Case 2 and 3 is that the principles of Action Research, in particular reflective learning, have been closely integrated with the organisational processes. Both researchers used an espoused and articulated theory-based approach to their work. There are two important aspects of these projects: both of these projects have also been typified by a relatively consistent focus on the work and both have been concerned with "mission-critical" processes with the organisation. In all three of these proceeding cases, the CEO has not only been supportive but actively involved in the projects.

A number of tentative conclusions can be drawn from the experiences outlined in the six case studies above.

- The requisite structures in both the University and the host organisation must reflect a balance between theory and action. Neither party can focus on one side of this equation, as it is the balance that reflects the mutual interests.
- The active involvement in the CEO greatly increases the chances of success. While emancipatory action research seeks to liberate people from the effects of power, business action research needs to work within, and develop, existing power structures. As a consequence, it must be firmly established within existing structural and policy frameworks.
- Viable, ongoing action research principles and practices need to be embedded in the structures and processes of the organisation. This is more desirable than having the principles and practices being "people specific".

CREATING THE REQUISITE STRUCTURES AT MONASH

The creation of a learning set at Monash has served as a structure which has fulfilled a number of functions for the participants. On reflection, the construction of the requisite variety between University and organization is an element that we have not developed well at Monash. This is borne out by the comments of the members of the cohort who see the group as providing an important support for the research process but make little or no mention of the University/Organization link.

John Molineux comments: "The learning set has enabled me to discuss ideas in a safe, yet intellectually critical and stimulating environment. Our discussions have opened up areas of research that I had not previously thought of, or had found in my individual research. It gave constructive feedback on academic papers and presentations. In the difficult times, it was reassuring to find that others were going through similar problems and we were able to seek solutions together and provide each other with encouragement."

Rod Sarah (Sarah and Haslett, 2002) reported two comments: Our sessions together are invaluable. When we are in our organisations, doing our action research, we have to be guarded and cautious. Being truly vulnerable and honest is too dangerous to the ongoing viability of your research. It's not always appropriate to say 'I don't know' and to show or share your ignorance, concerns or assumptions openly... yet this is what we should be doing if we are being truly reflective. It is not always possible to find a colleague in our organisational settings to share your deeper reflections with.

The monthly meeting allow us to hear directly from each other and this process reduces the sense of loneliness and isolation. We become as one. We are not however exclusive... when we have

invited guests, they are welcomed – we give freely to them and each other and in this process we increase our knowledge and understanding. In this process we all grow wiser, and more likely and willing to contribute – as we are served by the meetings, we are also more likely to serve...

Bev Walker comments:

“The group provided a forum for examining ideas with a group of like minded people, gaining new insights into the literature and the issues that arise with application of the theory to practice. Also personal support through what otherwise could be a lonely journey”

John Stephens comments:

“The structure allows for ‘respected opinion’. If we consider the Emery DP1 and DP2, we are all equal therefore the comments made by my supervisor and peers is taken as ‘gospel and sincere’ rather than contradictory or inflammatory. Rather than defend my position I accept critique as a given. These people are respected confidants, they are telling me as they see it and I have total respect for that opinion. We come from the same base (SD, systems, FMA, Argyris, Checkland) so that warrants respect!!”

Jane Olsen comments:

“At a practical level, the cohort provides support, different perspectives and reference material. I like to think that it provides “critical friends” however I don’t believe this has occurred yet or if it has it has been sub-optimal.”

The focus of these comments is on the university side of the equation. For the most part, the host organizations provided structures that allowed the “work” of AR to continue but that similar supportive structures that allowed for reflection on the nature of the work and its role in the organization have not been set up in the organizations. Such a situation requires a significant time commitment from managers. The reality is that in many organizations AR is tolerated rather than embraced and getting this commitment is problematic. The challenge is to work in organizations in where the benefits of AR and reflective learning are valued and supported. This can only be achieved through conducting significant and successful projects that serve as the basis for ongoing work.

The importance of the cohort for this group of action research is all of who are involved in quite diverse projects, is the provision of a "space" or forum where ideas and theory can be discussed and formulated. The cohort has a commonality of experience and intellectual background that provides what could best be described as a "systems" approach to their work. It is difficult to say whether a university is unique in being able to provide this forum or whether will be possible to replicate this within an organization. The challenge for organisations creating these groups is to produce a cohort of people with similar intellectual background interests and provide an environment in which the deeper and more perplexing issues of organisational life can be openly discussed. It is likely that such a forum will best be established outside individual organisations.

CONCLUSION

By mid-2004, two members of the cohort were in the final stages of the write-up of their thesis and three others aim to complete by the end of 2004. This first cycle of the work is nearing completion. A new group of doctoral students is forming around Action Research interests and will constitute the second major cycle. In order to maintain learning from the initial cohort, it is planned to bring the graduating students into the second cohort as associate supervisors. The most recent discussions of the cohort have involved the issue of the interface between the University and the organization. This discussion has been framed in terms of viable systems and requisite variety however this discussion is still in its early stages and the model is not yet well developed.

What is clear is that the choice of organization and the structures that can be established internally to support action research provide a necessary condition for the success of action research projects. In preparing for the next major cycle of action research, the cohort has fact returned to its initial point of discussion in the FMA framework and is addressing the question "How do we shape the Area of Application to a ensure the success of an action research project?" The ongoing work of this cohort is now in shaping and developing second and significant cycle of learning with the new cohort.

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