Chapter 13

EDUCING THEORY FROM PRACTICE

Richard Baskerville
Georgia State University, USA

Abstract: This chapter explores the discovery of new or enhanced theory within the action research process. Action research is an empirical research method with two purposes: (1) to solve an immediate practical problem, and (2) to develop new scientific knowledge. Action research projects sometimes succeed at the first, but fail at the second. The highly practical nature of action research sometimes leads to results that have little to contribute in terms of new scholarly knowledge. Although a difficult practical problem may have been resolved, academic publications will often reject reports of the results because the theoretical value is trivial. Action research that encounters difficulties in the attempts to employ existing theory in resolving an immediate practical problem is a more promising venue for developing new or enhanced theory. The most valuable venues for action research lie in the intractable problems of practice, problems that existing knowledge cannot seem to fix.

Key words: Action Research, Epistemology, Information Systems, Research Method

1. ACTION RESEARCH

Action research provides a method that both solves an immediate practical problem while developing social scientific knowledge. It is usually based on collaboration between researchers and research subjects, and is often a cyclical process that builds learning about change into a given social system (Hult & Lennung, 1980).

The discipline of information systems (IS) is appropriate for the use of action research because it is a highly applied field, almost vocational in nature (Avison, Lau, Myers, & Nielsen, 1999; Banville & Landry, 1989). Action research methods are highly clinical and place IS researchers in a “helping-role” within the organizations being studied. (cf. Schein, 1987, p.11). Action research is not only used by academic researchers, but is also
widely used for its practical value. Action research has been characterized as the “touchstone of most good organizational development practice” and as remaining “the primary methodology for the practice of organizational development” (Van Eynde & Bledsoe, 1990, p. 27). Because action research merges research and practice, it produces highly relevant research findings. Relevance, together with rigor, become the two most important measures of the significance of IS research (Keen, 1991).

The label “action research” can be legitimately applied to a wide range of research methods (Baskerville & Wood-Harper, 1998). The essence of action research is still a simple two-stage process. First, the diagnostic stage involves a collaborative analysis of the social situation by the researcher and the subjects of the research. Theories are formulated concerning the nature of the research domain. Second, the therapeutic stage involves collaborative change experiments. In this stage changes are introduced and the effects are studied (Blum, 1955). The two stages are iterated until the problem is solved.

The simple two-stage model is rarely found in practice. To help guide the research process, most action researchers expanded the structure that guides the research. The most common example is the five phase, cyclical process (Susman & Evered, 1978) that is couched within the establishment of a client system infrastructure or research environment. The iterated phases are:

1. diagnosing,
2. action planning,
3. action taking,
4. evaluating, and
5. specifying learning.

The client system infrastructure constitutes the research environment by agreement between the researchers and the host organization. This agreement specifies the authority by which the researchers and host practitioners may specify actions.