Chapter 15

IS ACTION RESEARCH AND ITS CRITERIA

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Abstract: There is little agreement on which criteria should be used in the design and evaluation of IS action research. Much action research is not at all explicit about the applied criteria. This chapter seeks to remedy this by eliciting from twenty odd years of action research six criteria. The epistemology of action research has traces back to pragmatism and with this as background the six criteria are presented and illustrated through a piece of recent action research. The contributions of the chapter are the six criteria, how to model these in their context of research activities and research contributions, and how to understand these criteria in a pragmatist view.

Key words: action research criteria, pragmatism, experience, problem solving, research design, research evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980’ies when I came to Lancaster University, UK, to study for my Ph.D. I was struck by the clarity with which Checkland and his colleagues explained their use of action research. Their particular use of action research had already then led to many advances in their research on problem-solving methodology in what is commonly known as Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981). I came from a Scandinavian background where action research was legitimate, but never well understood as a means for researching information systems. In retrospect, I think it is fair to state that it was more luck and good intentions that had led us to a reasonable research process. When I came to Lancaster, I was for the first time confronted with a clear intellectual account of action research. I was pleased to find that we had implicitly practiced action research – at least in part –, but it was also painfully apparent that we had much to learn. The Lancaster account of action research influenced our research practice immensely and
we have since been seeking to explain with clarity what we have done and why our findings amounted to research contributions. Much has happened with action research in the last twenty years and its use has diffused to larger parts of information systems research.

In this chapter I present how we now explain the criteria by which we design and evaluate action research. We have for many years used action research to study and improve the professional practice of information systems development. A few pieces of our action research are: the study of the use of methods in practice (Nielsen, 1990), a summary of the research on reflective systems development (Mathiassen, 1998), improvement of development practices (Iversen et al., 1999), the organization of action research and collaborative practice research (Mathiassen, 2002), an organizational view on software process improvement (Mathiassen et al., 2002). We first used the now six criteria explicitly in (Iversen et al., 2004). The purpose I will pursue in this chapter is to discuss pragmatism as the underlying research epistemology as well as how research activities, contributions, and criteria come together in designing and evaluating action research.

2. ACTION RESEARCH EPISTEMOLOGY

Most accounts of action research focus on its methodology, i.e., what to do and why. Action research methodology has often been traced back to Lewin (US) and to Tavistock (UK) where the discussions have concerned its therapeutic intentions. The epistemology underlying action researches has so far received little attention. Jönsson attribute his criterion of truth to the pragmatists James and Mead (Jönsson, 1991, p. 392). Baskerville & Myers in their foreword to the special issue on action research in MIS Quarterly suggest that pragmatism is its underlying philosophy (Baskerville & Myers, 2004). In this chapter I shall follow the same traces of action research epistemology.

The emergence of pragmatism as a philosophical discourse was for the most part due to William James though he attributed its principles to Charles S. Pierce more than a hundred years ago. An excellent historical account of pragmatism can be found in The Metaphysical Club (Menand, 2001). James summarises Pierce’s pragmatism with the idea of clearness:

“To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the objects may involve. … The ultimate test for us of what a truth means is indeed the conduct it dictates or inspires.” James, 1907, cited here from (Menand, 1997).