Chapter V

Action Research and its Use in E-Collaboration Inquiry

Ned Kock, Texas A&M International University, USA

Abstract

This chapter begins with a discussion of action research from a historical perspective. It then puts forth some ideas on how this research approach can be used in investigations of the design or e-collaboration technologies and the impact of those technologies on people. This is followed by a discussion of key epistemological considerations, including that of whether action research can be conducted in a positivist manner. The chapter then summarizes two special issues of journals, on information systems action research, which provide scholarly illustrations of some of the arguments presented here. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of how action research can be used by doctoral students investigating e-collaboration issues.
Action Research

According to most accounts, action research (AR) originated independently in the U.S. and England in the 1940s. In the U.S., AR emerged from the work of Kurt Lewin on a variety of topics, ranging from child welfare to group dynamics. Lewin was a German-born social psychologist whom many see as the “father” of AR. In England, AR’s origins are not tied to a particular individual, but to an institution—the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, where AR was used as a research method to both understand and treat socio-psychological disorders associated with war-related experiences.

To say that the range of areas and ways in which AR can be conducted is vast is an understatement. AR can be used in many general fields of inquiry such as bilingual education, clinical psychology, sociology, and information systems. It can be conducted in ways that are aligned with most epistemologies, including the positivist, interpretivist, and critical epistemologies. AR can have as its unit of analysis the individual, the small group, and even the entire organization. It can be used to address issues as varied as health concerns, environmental problems, engineering techniques, and business methods.

One of the key characteristics that distinguishes AR from most other research approaches, and also constitutes one of its main appeals, is that AR aims at both improving the subject of the study (often called “research client”), and generating knowledge, achieving both at the same time. While this characteristic may seem straightforward enough to easily differentiate AR from most other research approaches—such as experimental, survey, and case research—it is not.

Let us assume, for the sake of illustration, that a survey-based research project was conducted addressing the differential access to the Internet between two main income groups, one high (wealthy) and the other low (poor), in a particular city, where the reasons for the digital divide are unclear. Can that research be considered AR if a report based on it is used by the city’s government to bridge the gap that characterizes the divide? The answer is “yes”, if the research encompasses the city’s actions, and possibly a follow-up survey assessment of the impact of those actions. The answer is “no”, if the research ended with the analysis of the survey and the publication of the summary report.

Because of AR’s dual goal, researchers employing it are said to have to satisfy two “masters” (Kock & Lau, 2001; Sommer, 1994)—the subject (or subjects) of the research, and the research community. Historically, one could argue that it has been harder to satisfy the latter, especially in fields of inquiry where AR has not traditionally been used—such as e-collaboration.
Related Content

A Framework for Designing Computer Supported Learning Systems with Sensibility
www.igi-global.com/article/framework-designing-computer-supported-learning/75213?camid=4v1a

Communicating Reasoning and Dialectics
www.igi-global.com/chapter/communicating-reasoning-dialectics/67324?camid=4v1a

Impact of Chinese Culture Values on Knowledge Sharing Through Online Communities of Practice
www.igi-global.com/chapter/impact-chinese-culture-values-knowledge/8850?camid=4v1a
A Case Study of Web-Based Collaborative Decision Support at NASA
www.igi-global.com/article/case-study-web-based-collaborative/1946?camid=4v1a