Nine Challenges for e-Government Action Researchers

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ABSTRACT

Action research is widespread in many of the background disciplines that underpin the e-Government field and is beginning to take root as a legitimate e-Government research method. Canonical Action Research (CAR) is the most widely used form of action research; however, it relies on premises that can be problematic in the e-Government context. This article details some of those underlying assumptions, and shows the difficulties that result when applied to a relatively typical e-Government case study: the implementation of an advanced email system in Danish public administration. The empirical experience calls many of the standard premises into question, and these are categorised. The authors summarise the resulting experience as nine challenges for action researchers working in the e-Government field, and investigate some possible responses.

Keywords: Action Research, Canonical Action Research, Digital Post Project, E-Communication, E-Government, Public Sector

INTRODUCTION

E-Government is an applied field, covering many areas with immediate practical implications. Examples are information technology (IT) system implementations, benefits realisation, information security, the digital divide, accountability, interoperability (Ottjacques, Hitzelberger, & Feltz, 2007), architecture development, infrastructure and governance (Meso, Musa, Straub, & Mbarika, 2009), project management (Pan, Pan, Newman, & Flynn, 2006), utilisation and take-up of services (Carter & Belanger, 2005), citizen participation (Olphert & Damodaran, 2007), citizen trust (Teo, Srivastava, & Jiang, 2008), and democracy (Mahrer & Krimmer, 2005). Early automation logics (IT should automate the work process) were replaced by the logic of transformation (Irani, Elliman, & Jackson, 2007; Tan & Pan, 2003): government organisations

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should change in response to the information technologies implemented. The research area is closely related to information systems (IS) since it primarily concerns the applied study of computerised information systems in organisational settings. Action research is an acknowledged method for generating knowledge in applied settings, particularly where organisational development is an issue, and has a strong tradition amongst IS researchers. It’s therefore natural to use action research as a research approach in the e-Government area, to use earlier experiences in IS research as models, and to look for methodological guidance in the IS literature. Though a variety of action research forms have been used in IS, the most widespread is canonical action research (Davison et al. 2004).

Action research is beginning to take root in e-Government, and recent studies cover a wide variety of themes including: design and development of information systems (Pardo & Scholl, 2002; Wastell, Kawalek, Langmead-Jones, & Ormerod, 2004), focus groups in service development (Axelsson & Melin, 2007), citizen participation (Axelsson & Melin, 2007), security (Smith, Jamieson, & Winchester, 2007) and how an organization moves from one e-Government stage to the next (Lee, 2010). The choice of theme seems to have little influence on the decision to use action research. However they show some convergence in methodological approach, tending either to use canonical action research (Scholl, 2004; Smith et al., 2007; Wastell et al., 2004), or to avoid specifying much methodological detail.

It is therefore a useful point in time to reflect upon the use of action research in e-Government. The embedding of IT systems in public administration presents a particular context for action research that demonstrates characteristics (administration traditions, large projects, responsibility to citizens, involvement of elected representatives) not shared by private sector organisations. Action researchers may therefore face unfamiliar problems not accounted for in current methodological prescriptions. Our research objective is therefore to categorise some major challenges, based on a recent experience working with the introduction of digital post in Copenhagen. The initiative was part of a wider programme to replace physical mail between the public sector and its various respondents (citizens, businesses, voluntary organizations) with a secure email system. The email system was designed to respect the respondents’ privacy and security, whilst enabling significant cost savings. However its implementation encountered many problems, including changing administrative practice, technical implementation difficulties and concerns for citizens’ rights.

Since there is no way to experimentally test the effectiveness of an action research method using the principles of natural science, the reflection takes the form of a retrospective evaluation of the action research case informed both by method theory and the empirical experience, in the manner of Checkland (1998, 1990). The article first delineates a set of premises (or assumptions) derived retroductively through identifying methodological issues of importance in the case and tracing their origins in the AR literature. We show how these premises are partially undermined by typical conditions in e-Government projects, demonstrated through our experiences with digital post, and supported by prior research. We formulate the resulting difficulties as challenges for AR researchers in e-Government to help better prepare them for this style of research and discuss some possible responses to them.

**Canonical Action Research in the IS Field**

Action research evolved in organizational studies as a reaction to the inability of positivist research methods to generate knowledge about organizational development and organizational problem solving (Susman & Evered, 1978). It ‘aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint col-
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