Day 8: Action Research

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| Day 8 Specific Learning Outcomes |
| 1. **Differentiate the characteristics of action research.** |
| 1. **Appraise the applicability of action research to leadership studies.** |
| 1. **Assess the implications of appreciative inquiry to leadership.** |
| 1. **Critique the features of a mixed methods research report.** |
| 1. **Assess the implications of appreciative inquiry to leadership generally.** |
| 1. **Consider ways appreciative inquiry might be utilized in your leadership practice.** |

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| Book/Article | Author | Pages |
| *Understanding Research* | Plano-Clark & Creswell  (2015) | 430-462 |
| Action research. | Smith, M. | <http://www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm> |
| Learning leadership through appreciative inquiry. | Walker & Carr-Stewart | https://ezproxy.student.twu.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=15109243&site=ehost-live |

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| Class Announcement: Transition & New Focus |
| **We want to shift our focus from the highly theoretical and rigidly structured forms of formal research that we have considered this far and to look at a form of research that you are more likely to employ as a leader—action research. Action research has evolved as a method well suited to leadership and organizational studies as well as in educational settings. Today we will explore how action research is related to and yet distinct from the other forms of research we have explored to date. If formal research approaches (qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods) are aimed at generating new knowledge, action research is aimed at finding solutions to local problems and issues. Also, today we will extend our focus on action research to explore a particular approach to action research that has enjoyed wide currency—David Cooperrider’s Appreciative Inquiry.** |

Mini-Notes: Action Research

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| Theme, Theorists & Concepts |
| * Action Research |

**Action Research Design[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Action research has been defined as “a form of applied research whose primary purpose is to increase the quality, impact, and justice” of professional practice (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 597). Its purpose is to solve local problems through the application of systematic investigation. The problem is local, the investigation is local, and there is little concern for generalizing results to other settings. “The primary goal of action research is the solution of a given problem, not contribution to science” (Gay, 1987, p. 8). Action research may employ virtually any research methodology, and will commonly be conducted collaboratively with other professionals. Action research differs from more formal research in some important ways.

Formal research is typically conducted by researchers with a great deal of experience and/or training in research, and who wish to produce new, generalizable knowledge. Action research is typically conducted by those with much less experience in and knowledge of research, with the intention of solving a current, local problem. Formal research typically employs random or representative sampling techniques, while action research will typically employ convenience sampling. Formal research designs typically exhibit rigorous controls, with a long time frame, while action research designs display more casual procedures, often employing emergent designs, and are focused on short term time frames (Gall, Gall & Borg 2007, p. 598). Action research can serve personal, professional, and political purposes.

At its heart, action research is cyclical in nature. Gill and Johnson (2002) assert that action research is

a planned intervention by a researcher, or more often a consultant, into some natural social setting, such as an organization. The effects of that intervention are then monitored and evaluated with the aim of discerning whether or not that action has produced the expected consequences. In other words, the researcher acts upon his or her beliefs or theories in order to change the organization. (p. 71)

Going back to Boyer’s model of scholarship, what distinguishes action research as ***research or scholarly inquiry***  (i.e., as more than problem-solving) is the explicit commitment to ***contribute to existing knowledge, even if it is not widely generalizable.***

The method of action research presented by Gill and Johnson draws on Lewin’s theory of studying things through changing them (i.e., change as the method or ***process*** of research). Stringer and Genat (2004) outline a research process that has action as final step, after eliciting stakeholder perspectives, analyzing data (identifying key features of stakeholder experience), and writing the research report (i.e., change as the ***outcome*** of research). Stringer and Genat also emphasize the participatory process of action research in which change is brought about through the participants in the research project, rather than being imposed on them from the outside. They explain that

a major purpose of participatory approaches to inquiry is to bring people together in a dialogic and productive relationship, enabling the development of a sense of community through the sharing of perspectives, the negotiation of meaning, and the development of collaboratively produced activities, programs, and projects. (Stringer & Genat, 2004, p. 9)

Such purposes resonate with the values embedded in servant leadership, don’t they!

Glanz has suggested that an action research cycle consists of six steps, which may or may not be always addressed in order. The usual first step is to select a focus. This is typically followed by data collection, then the analysis and interpretation of the data. The analysis and interpretation of data typically would suggest action to be taken. Action is followed by a period of reflection on the results of the action, and on the basis of this reflection, the action is either continued or modified. The cycle then comes full circle to begin with a new focus (Glanz, 1998, p. 27). The processes of action research are closely allied with the concept of praxis, which will be explored briefly in Day 10.

**References:**

Gall, M., Gall, J. & Borg, W. (2007). *Educational research.* Boston, MA: Pearson.

Gay, L. (1987). *Educational research*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Gill, J., & Johnson, P. (2002). *Research methods for managers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Smith, M. K. (2007) Action research. The Encyclopedia of Informal Education, www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm.

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| Theme, Theorists & Concepts |
| * Appreciative Inquiry: David Cooperrider |

**Appreciative Inquiry** (AI) is a relatively new approach, with its roots in action research. AI comes out of the field of organizational development, arising from the early work of David Cooperrider in his doctoral dissertation (Cooperrider 1986), and furthered in a seminal work entitled *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). AI is an organizational development philosophy variously termed an approach, a theory, a mindset, and a worldview, that leads to analysis resulting in organization learning and creativity (Watkins & Cooperrider 2000).

AI is the process of applying the framework of social constructionism in a positive context (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005, p. 13). This is typically accomplished by moving through the AI “4-D” cycle, consisting of the following four phases: discovery, dream, design and destiny. The discovery phase is designed to discover and value, or appreciate, those factors that give life to an organization. In the dream phase, participants are invited to dream, or envision what might be, based on the previous valuing what is best now. In the design phase, participants co-construct an “organizational architecture” which leads to a future where the “exceptional becomes ordinary” (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005, p. 6). The design phase naturally leads to the final destiny, where the organizational architecture from the design phase is implemented. AI is depicted as future oriented, transformational, community responsive, trust building, common vision enhancing, and leading to an acceleration of organizational learning (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2005, p. xix).

Hammond (1998) summarizes the steps of AI this way:

* Appreciating and Valuing the Best of “What Is”
* Envisioning “What Might Be”
* Dialoging “What Should Be”
* Innovating “What Will Be” (p. 24)

AI holds great potential for the organizational leader. At its foundation is a worldview that is focused on identifying and cultivating the positive within an organization. It accomplishes this by valuing people and involving people at the grass roots in creating vision. The resulting vision will in turn be more likely to be shared and embraced, driving the innovation forward toward actualization.

Walker and Carr-Stewart’s (2004) article is an excellent example of a research study report that employs AI as the chosen method. As you read, consider what AI brings to leadership studies, and how it might intersect with servant leadership.

**References:**

Cooperrider, David. 1986. *Appreciative inquiry: Toward a methodology for understanding and enhancing organizational innovation*. (Doctoral dissertation, Case Western Reserve University). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (AAT 8611485)

Cooperrider, D. & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In R. Woodman and W. Pasmore (Eds.), *Research in organizational change and development*. Stamford, CT: JAI Press.

Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D. & Stavros, J. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry handbook*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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1. © David Williaume 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)