

Action Research in Business and Management

Danuvasin Charoen, Ph.D., PMP
NIDA Business School
Bangkok, Thailand
danuvasin@gmail.com

Why action research?

- AR not only seeks to study organizational phenomena but also seeks to create organizational change and study the process at the same time (Baburoglu and Ravn, 1992)
- The goal of AR is to solve present practical problem while extending scientific knowledge (Baskerville and Myers, 2004).
- AR allows researchers to experiment throughout intervention and to reflect the effect of their intervention and the implication of theories (Avison et al, 1999).
- AR can address complex real world problems and the immediate concerns of practitioners (Avison et al, 1999).

The gap between Research and Practice

- ☐ Alleged

- ☐ IS research has no influence on IS practice

- ☐ Evidence

- ☐ Practitioners do not read research articles

- ☐ Conclusion

- ☐ IS research and practice are separated by a huge gap

- ☐ There is no mutual informing between the two

Action Research: Definition

- *”Action research simultaneously assists in practical problem-solving and expands scientific knowledge, as well as enhances the competencies of the respective actors, being performed collaboratively in an immediate situation using data feedback in a cyclical process aiming at an increased understanding of change processes in social systems and undertaken within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.”*

Hult & Lennung, 1980

Action Research basics

- Action research is building/testing theory within context of solving an immediate practical problem in real setting
- Thus it combines theory and practice, researchers and practitioners, and intervention and reflection
- Collaboration with practitioners and their learning is vital
- Action research is not consulting: it is action, but still research

Action Research assumptions

- Social settings cannot be reduced for study
- Action (i.e. intervention) brings understanding
- Action research is performed collaboratively
- Researchers and practitioners are partners
- Both groups emerge with enhanced competencies

Characteristics of AR

Characteristics	Explanation
Future Oriented	Action research deals with the practical concern of an organization, aiming to create a better future for an organization.
Collaborative	Action research requires collaboration between researcher and the client system.
Implies system development	Action research aims to improve the system. The goal here is to create problem-solving processes in the system and to generate new knowledge about these methods.
Generates theory rounded in action	Action research generates theories by taking action guided by theory and evaluating consequences for the problems that organizations face.
Agnostic	The theory and knowledge in action research are the product of previously taken action and are subject to reexamination and reformulation upon entering new research settings.
Situational	The theory from action research depends largely on its organizational context.

Comparison of action research and positivist research

Characteristics	Action Research	Positivist Research
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knowledge in action• Theory building and testing in action	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Universal knowledge• Theory building and testing
Type of knowledge acquired	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Particular• Situational• Praxis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Universal• Covering law
Nature of data validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contextually embedded• Experimental	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Context free• Logic, Measurement• Consistency of prediction and control
The role of researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Actor• Agent of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observer
The researcher's relationship to setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immersed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Detached and neutral

Comparison of action research and positivist research

Characteristics	Positivist Science	Action Research
Value position	Methods are value neutral	Methods develop social systems and release human potential
Time perspective	Observation of the present	Observation of the present plus interpretation of the present from knowledge of the past, conceptualization of more desirable futures
Relationship with units	Detached spectator, client system members are objects to study	Client system members are self reflective subjects with whom one can collaborate
Treatment of units studied	Cases are of interest only as representatives of populations	Case can be sufficient sources of knowledge
Language for describing units	Denotative, observational	Connotative, metaphorical
Basis for assuming existence of units	Exist independently of human beings	Human artifacts for human purposes
Epistemological aims	Prediction of events from propositions arranged hierarchically	Development of guides for taking actions with desired outcomes
Strategy for growth of knowledge	Induction and deduction	Conjecturing, creating settings for learning and modeling of behavior
Criteria for confirmation	Logical consistency, prediction and control	Evaluating whether actions produce intended consequences
Basis for generalization	Broad, universal, and free of context	Narrow, situational, and bound by context

Adapted from Coughlan and Coughlan (2002)

When action research is appropriate

- Action research is appropriate when the research question pertains to the unfolding of a series of actions over time in a particular group, organization, or community.
- The research attempts to understand how and why their action can change or improve any aspects of a system and to understand the process of change or improvement in order to learn from that action process (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002).

The role of the action researcher

- Action researchers are outside agents that act as “facilitators of the action and reflection within an organization” p. 227 (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002).
- The researchers act as consultants to help the clients investigate their problems and issues and build and implement solutions to the problems or issues. When action researchers take part in the research, they are simultaneously engaging in their own experiential learning cycle activities of experiencing, reflecting, interpreting, and taking action (Kolb, 1984).

How theory can be generated through action research

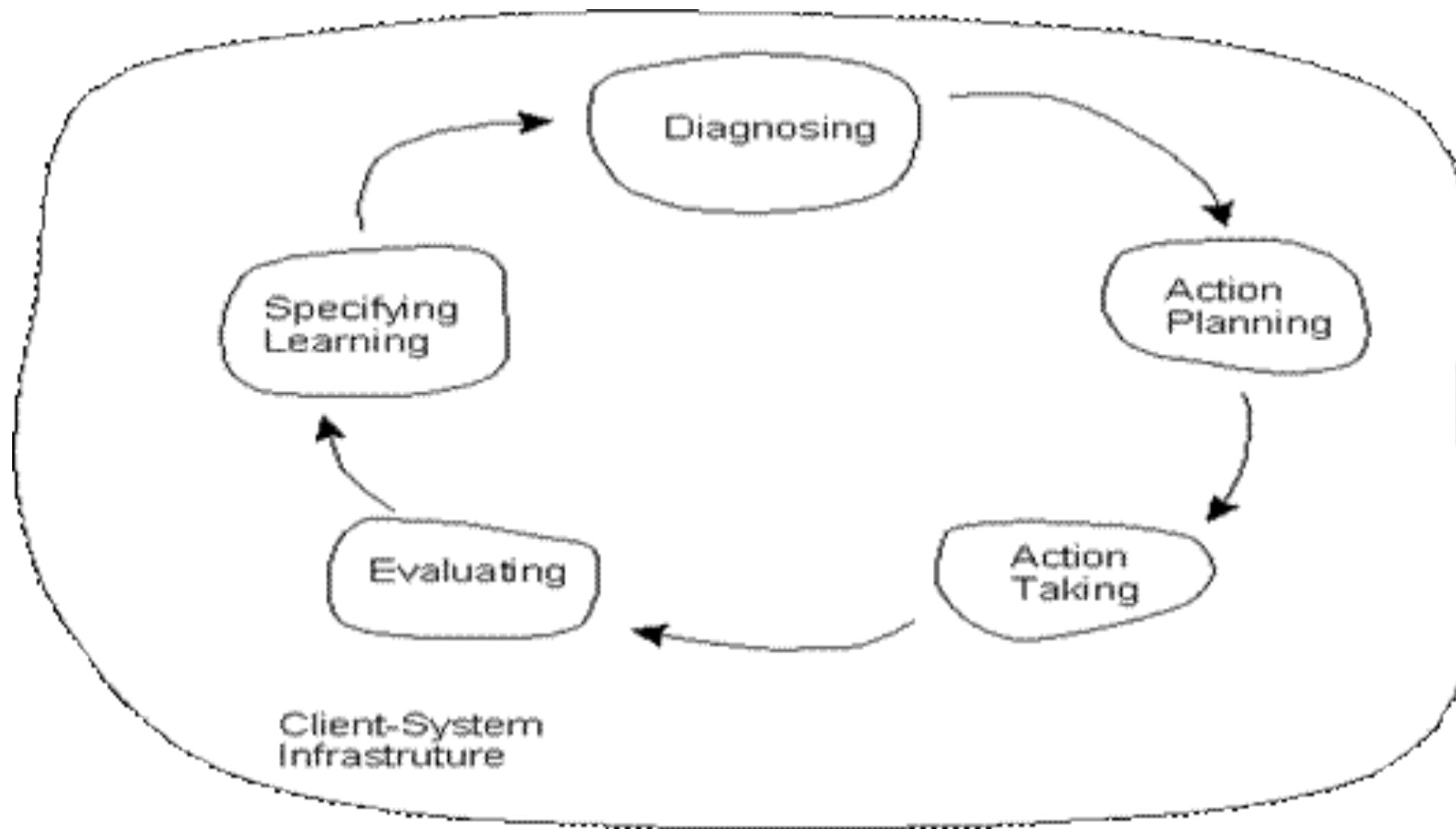
- Edden and Huxham (1996) propose that action research can generate emergent theory, where the theory expands from a synthesis of that which emerges from the data and that which emerges from the practice of the theory which guided the intervention.
- Action research addresses organization problems with theory that is formed from the conceptualization of particular experience in a way that is intended to be meaningful to others.

How action research is carried out

The primary goal of action research is to solve present practical problems while expanding scientific knowledge (Baskerville & Myers, 2004). In almost every action research, there are three important processes.

1. The first process involves the diagnostic process concerning a collaborative analysis of the organizational situation.
2. The second process is a therapeutic one concerning collaborative change. In this second process, changes need to be initiated, and the researcher studies the consequence of these changes (Blum, 1955).
3. The third step involves theorizing the lessons learned from the changing process.

The Framework of AR



Source: Susman and Evered (1978)

Action Research process

- Diagnosing a problem
 - develop a theoretical premise
- Action planning
 - guided by theoretical framework
- Action taking
 - intervention, introducing change
- Evaluating, reflecting
 - internal and external criteria
 - effects of change, theoretical premises
- Specifying learning
 - “double loop”, feed next iteration
 - theorise

Examples of AR in IS

Author & Title	Journal and Year	About the paper/study	Key Points – AR Related
1. Aune, B. Teaching Action Research via Distance	Journal and Technology and Teacher Education 2002, Vol. 10:4, pp.461-479	Factors/issues that should be considered in teaching Ar via distance education	End with a 10-point recommendation on what instructors can/should do if they are teaching/guiding action research via distance education
2. Avison, D.; Lau, F. Myers, M. and Nielsen, P.A. Action Research	Association of Computing Machinery. Communications of the ACM, Jan 1999; 42:1	Stress on the importance of bridging the gap between academic and practice and how AR can play a role in doing so.	Suggest that although action research can bridge the gap, limited guideline exists on how to conduct good action research. One could argue that this paper does not point an accurate picture regarding the state of AR and how it us/can be used in IS. MISQ Special issue on AR (2004) offers a comprehensive guideline on how one can conduct AR effectively.
3. Bartoli, A. Hermel, P. and Ramis-Pujol, J. Innovation assessment as a management information tool: A case study.	Measuring Business Excellence; 2003. Vol.7:2, pp.6-20.	The authors conduct a case study on a large multinational pharmaceutical company to assess innovation in an organizational context.	They focus more on organizational innovation and how questions can related to this notion can be addressed – but pay limited attention to how AR was used a methodology to conduct this study.
4. Davidson, R. and Martinsons, M. Empowerment or enslavement? A case of process-based organizational change in Hong Kong	Information Technollgy and People, 2002, Vol 15:1 pp.42-59	Study the impact of business process engineering and the notion of empowerment in a Hong Kong based accounting firm.	Use Canonical Action Research based on Susman and Evered's (1978) 5-step process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Diagnosing •Action Planning •Action Taking •Evaluating and •Specifying Learning

Limitation

- The main criticism of action research (and other forms of qualitative study) is that it is not representative and that findings cannot be applied in a general way to other populations (Checkland & Holwell, 1998; Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002; Yin, 1994). However, Yin (1994) proposed the idea that the purpose of qualitative research is to generalize findings to theory instead of any particular population.

Limitation (Con.)

- The action research study depends largely on the perception, experience, and analytical ability of the single researcher.
- Another criticism is related to lack of control. Unlike a traditional lab experiment, an action researcher does not have control over the factors related to the study.

Conclusions

- Action research can be used to bridge the gap between academic study and practice because it promises to solve organizational problems and to generate theory (learning outcomes) simultaneously.
- Action research provides practical significance because the study is conducted and applied in a natural setting, and therefore can have an impact on real life situations and solutions.
- From the review of the literature, we have found that the most common use of action research is the five-step process, including problem diagnosis, action planning, intervention, evaluation, and specification of learning outcomes (R. Davison & Martisons, 2002; Lindgren, Henfridsson, & Schultze, 2004; Susman & Evered, 1978).