Companions to Action Research: Reaching Beyond our Networks to Build Alignments and a Common Repository of Resources

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INTRODUCTION

Action research is one of a number of approaches which, collectively, focus on one or more of:

- 1 Bridging understanding and action: combining increased understanding of the problem with action to ameliorate it.
- 2 The systems nature of the problem: examining the interrelationships between various aspects of the problem, as well as the broader issues the problem relates to and those interconnections.
- 3 Problem context: understanding the political, economic, social, historical and other circumstances and how they impact on the problem at the time of study.
- 4 Values: making the values about the problem and about research explicit.
- 5 Unknowns: recognizing that all unknowns cannot be reduced to knowns and that if they are not dealt with they can lead to unintended adverse consequences and unpleasant surprises.

Other approaches include: adaptive management, complex project management, complex

systems science, integrated assessment, interdisciplinarity, management science, operations research, post-normal science, sustainability science, system dynamics, systemic intervention, systems thinking and transdisciplinarity. Each of these has a community of practice and many have one or more professional associations. But as will be argued next, the further development of action research and of these other approaches is now being held back by fragmentation and disconnection.

The bulk of this chapter charts a way to overcome this fragmentation and disconnection. The solution is not to coalesce. As is the case with action research, each of the other research approaches is dynamic and evolving, so the process of charting the boundaries and overlaps to develop a shared approach is not straightforward. And it is probably not particularly worthwhile or even desirable. Instead, the most productive way forward is to maintain the diversity, while also developing a common repository of resources.

This provides multiple points of entry to this style of research, allows critical differences to be maintained and fostered, facilitates creative and productive interactions at the boundaries, enables continuing evolution plus adaptation of the research to the needs of particular problems, while at the same time allowing commonalities to be shared and built on, avoiding wasteful duplication.

THE PROBLEMS OF FRAGMENTATION AND DISCONNECTION

One obvious characteristic of action research and these other approaches is that the communities of practice are small compared with conventional disciplines. A useful indicator is the number of conference attendees, which is generally less than 500, where for disciplines it can be in the tens of thousands. While most of us would probably prefer to attend a small conference than a mega-convention, that is not the salient issue. More important is that the flow and cross-fertilization of ideas is very limited, as is the audience for new ideas. Joint conferences, between say action research and integrated assessment, are rare, which exacerbates the problem.

Across approaches, there is also considerable duplication of effort. Because there is little interaction between action research and transdisciplinarity, for instance, there is no sharing of useful insights on problem framing or co-production of knowledge. Instead each approach builds its own methods and terminology, widening the gulf further.

Another critical component to the fragmentation and disconnection is that some researchers around the globe who are tackling important social and environmental issues belong to these communities of practice in name only and are often unaware of even a narrow range of concepts and methods that could help them achieve their research goals. They proceed intuitively and reinvent ways forward. This disconnection also means that when these researchers develop a useful

idea or technique, the established area they are nominally part of, such as action research and systemic intervention, may not hear of or benefit from it.

A further disconnection is between types of problems, so that concepts and methods developed in research on an environmental problem are generally not picked up by people studying health problems, for example. Although there are some exceptions, by-and-large this disconnection is very limiting. Just imagine if separate statistical techniques were used in different problem areas – if the statistics used in research on education had no connection with the statistics used in research on policing. That is unthinkable, yet for the kinds of methods and concepts used in action research and allied areas, that is exactly the situation we find ourselves in.

This fragmentation and disconnection has important consequences for the position of action research and related approaches in the conventional academic world, particularly lack of power and marginalization. The appropriate 'college of peers' that a funding agency, for example, can draw on to review grants is small and hard to identify.

How might we move forward?

COULD WE BUILD A SHARED REPOSITORY OF CONCEPTS, METHODS AND CASES?

A productive way forward could be to join forces in sharing concepts and methods for bridging understanding and action, as well as dealing with the systems nature of the problem, problem context, values and unknowns. This would draw on the efforts of researchers involved in action research and other formal approaches, along with those whose work is problem-based and only nominally aligned to specific approaches. As well as lodging concepts and methods in the repository as they are developed, researchers can also draw on the collection when looking for new or improved tools.

Along with concept examples would be used to illustrate the strengths and different concepts and methods, and help identify uses, and help identify between options. For example, methods can be useful for action, with different dialogue in a policy context involves a community.

That concerns what contain, but how would it be built?

An analogy is used to the 'work' question, with statistics providing a guide improves research their ability to tackle of problems and as discipline captures concepts achieve that purpose statistics is particularly gains through this method. For example, a statistical method while working problem deposits innovation in the center where it can be put working on other ment or education.

The main vehicle established textbooks journals, along with exist for individual action research and is no channel for insights together. more conventional provide countless ties. Three examples digital repository Implementation (<http://i2s.anu.edu>) which more below (<http://www.tear>) and the encyclopedia netics (<http://dev>)

We might also building capacity

Along with concepts and methods, case examples would be useful. They would illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of different concepts and methods, imaginative new uses, and help identify criteria for choosing between options. For example, dialogue methods can be useful for bridging understanding and action, with different methods useful for dialogue in a policy context or when the work involves a community organization.

That concerns what a repository would contain, but how would it work and how could it be built?

An analogy is useful for the 'how would it work'? question, with the discipline of statistics providing a good example. Statistics improves research projects by enhancing their ability to tackle the quantitative aspects of problems and as a methods-based discipline captures concepts and methods that achieve that purpose. The discipline of statistics is particularly good at transmitting findings through this repository of knowledge. For example, a statistician who creates a new method while working on a health-related problem deposits information about the innovation in the central statistics repository, where it can be picked up by statisticians working on other problems in the environment or education, for example.

The main vehicles for the repository are established textbooks and peer-reviewed journals, along with conferences. While these exist for individual approaches, such as action research and system dynamics, there is no channel for bringing cross-cutting insights together. As well as expanding these more conventional repositories, digital media provide countless additional opportunities. Three examples of targeted or small digital repositories are the Integration and Implementation Sciences (I2S) resources (<http://i2s.anu.edu.au/resources>) – about which more below – the team science toolkit (<http://www.teamsciencetoolkit.cancer.gov>) and the encyclopedia of systems and cybernetics (<http://dev.systemspedia.org/>).

We might also think imaginatively about building capacity. What if we worked

collaboratively to build a global online curriculum that exposed participants to the range of approaches which have similar mindsets? We could draw on the best teachers and most prestigious researchers from each approach to record foundational lectures that could be viewed anywhere in the world. They could form the basis of formal on-site or online courses at individual institutions, which could supplement them with their own areas of expertise and provide accreditation. We could build on the advances being pioneered by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) to strengthen our numbers and position. A side benefit would be building an identifiable college of peers.

SHOULD THERE BE AN UNDERPINNING DISCIPLINE?

A repository of concepts, methods and case studies could provide the starting point for building a discipline that would support action research and other approaches of a similar mindset. An argument for I2S as such a discipline, plus a framework for how the repository would be structured is presented in Bammer (2013).

In brief, the proposal for I2S is presented diagrammatically in Figure 55.1. There are three domains:

- 1 Synthesizing disciplinary and stakeholder knowledge.
- 2 Understanding and managing diverse unknowns.
- 3 Providing integrated research support (combining the synthesized knowledge with an approach to the remaining unknowns) for policy and practice change.

At this first stage of building a repository, each domain would house relevant concepts, methods and case examples. (Tools and examples which crossed two or three domains could, of course, also be accommodated.)

The domains are portrayed as pentagons, because a five question framework is used

Figure 55.1 The three domains which comprise the suggested new discipline of Integration and Implementation Science (I2S)

to organize the material in each domain (Figure 55.2).

The first question – for what and for whom? – aims to develop clarity about the aims and beneficiaries of the research and to think about these in relation to each domain. Beneficiaries include those whose perspectives are used in the knowledge synthesis and understanding and management of unknowns, as well as those who will benefit from the policy and practice change.

The second question – which knowledge, unknowns and aspects of policy and practice? – is about the approach used. It particularly concentrates on the systems view that is taken, how the problem and those to be involved are scoped and boundaries are set, how the problem and outcomes are framed, how values are dealt with, and how collaborations (which involve harnessing and managing differences) are handled.

The third question – how? – covers the specific methods employed in the research. For knowledge synthesis these could be particular dialogue or modelling methods for instance. For understanding and managing unknowns, these could involve methods to

accept unknowns such as hedging or developing scenarios. For supporting policy and practice change, methods could include co-production of knowledge or advocacy.

The fourth question – context? – prompts consideration of the circumstances in which the research is conducted. This includes the big picture context, such as the history of the problem and the political circumstances in which change is proposed. It also includes the authorization for the research and action, in other words who has asked for and is funding the research and who will need to sanction any policy or practice changes? Finally considerations of context also include the organizational barriers and facilitators for the research, which involve the structures and cultures of the organizations involved. For example, an organization may wish to conduct research which crosses the life sciences and social sciences, but actually has no social scientists on its staff. Or the attitude of a government department to research input could be welcoming or hostile.

The final question – outcome? – evaluates the decisions made for each of the other questions. Although there are no perfect ways to undertake this kind of research, some choices

1. For what and for whom?
Aims and beneficiaries

2. Which knowledge, unknowns and aspects of policy and practice?
a) systems view
b) scoping
c) boundary setting
d) framing
e) dealing with values
f) harnessing and managing differences

Figure 55.2 The five questions and the I2S discipline

are better than others are for the evaluation. For choice made for the or would another system more appropriate for effective dialogue more organizational facilitation

At the beginning of for action research and were described:

- 1 Bridging understanding
- 2 The systems nature of
- 3 Problem context
- 4 Values
- 5 Unknowns

Each of these is one of the three domain structures bridges understanding this to also encompass

Figure 55.2 The five questions which provide the framework for organizing the domains and the I2S discipline as a whole

are better than others and this forms the basis for the evaluation. For example, was a good choice made for the systems method used or would another systems method have been more appropriate for the problem? Was an effective dialogue method used? Were the organizational facilitators effectively utilized?

At the beginning of this chapter five foci for action research and related approaches were described:

- 1 Bridging understanding and action
- 2 The systems nature of the problem
- 3 Problem context
- 4 Values
- 5 Unknowns

Each of these is encompassed in I2S. The three domain structure of I2S explicitly bridges understanding and action, expanding this to also encompass unknowns, as one of

the domains. It is not enough to base actions only on what is known about the problem and the key actors. There needs to be an appreciation that everything can never be known and unless there is some accommodation for the unknown, bad mistakes can be made. We have yet to develop ways of thinking about unknowns that are as sophisticated as those for considering knowledge.

By incorporating the systems view into question 2, I2S ensures that this is considered separately for the problem and for the actions that are to be taken. In other words the problem is conceived as a system and so is the diverse range of organizations and actors who will make change happen. Similarly, context and values are also considered separately and equally for the knowledge synthesis, unknowns and policy and practice domains.

DO WE NEED A 'BIG SCIENCE' PROJECT TO BUILD THE REPOSITORY AND DISCIPLINE?

How can we best move forward? Action research and other like-minded approaches are all separately compiling and codifying knowledge; this Handbook is one example. We could try to build bridges in a piecemeal manner as resources, energy and opportunity allow. Or we could argue for a bold initiative that would give the approaches we champion a boost. What about a Big Science-like effort analogous to the Human Genome Project?

Like the Human Genome Project, what is required in the first instance is to unravel and catalogue what we already know and do, and then to use that as the basis for new developments. Imagine if getting access to *all* the currently developed ways of thinking about and dealing with values was as straightforward

as looking up statistical methods for dealing with confounders.

The urgency of the problems facing humankind and the strength of the concepts, methods and case examples that action research and like-minded approaches have already developed provide the basis for mounting an argument for a Big Science-type project. It would be up to us to determine if we could work together effectively to produce and organize a valuable repository. The ideas here aim to provide a stimulus for our thinking.

REFERENCE

- Bammer, G. (2013) *Disciplining Interdisciplinarity: Integration and Implementation Sciences for Researching Complex Real-world Problems*. Canberra: ANU Press, <http://press.anu.edu.au?p=222171>.

Surely the greatest opportunity for action research is to help the human community make effective responses to the crisis of our times? The crisis is the ecology of the planet, the extinction of species, the underlying rate, and the benign climate in which we have developed. It is not just these changes threatening the planet but making the planet uninhabitable for living beings.

While historically we have been both sustainable and destructive, we modern humans do not know how to create a sustainable world on Earth – Thomas Berry, a theologian who wrote about the connections between our understandings of life and our presence on Earth to the 'great work' called (Berry, 1999).

The SAGE Handbook of
Action Research

An abstract graphic consisting of numerous horizontal lines of varying lengths and shades of gray, creating a sense of motion or a blurred effect.

Third Edition

Edited by
Hilary Bradbury

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Marketing manager: Sally Ransom
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Typeset by: Cenveo Publisher Services
Printed in Great Britain by Henry Ling
Limited, at the Dorset Press, Dorchester,
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2014957178

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN 978-1-4462-9454-3

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