Description

The Action Research Process

Action research (AR) assumes that the solution to an identified problem can be achieved in multiple cycles of a distinct process. Rather than following the objectivity of the pure scientific method, Action Research typically involves a population that is directly involved with both the problem and the solution. When a team of people is involved, the title changes to Participatory Action Research (PAR), and all stakeholders commit to direct involvement in all aspects of what is a primarily democratic research process.

Action Research involves identifying multiple iterations of a research process that has specific steps. Different proponents advocate for different numbers of steps, from three to seven, but the basic structure of the cycle is the same: Design a protocol to collect data on the identified issue, analyze the data to develop a proposed solution, implement the solution and observe the results, reflect on those results to modify your proposed solution, and re-implement until the final solution is found. Planning, Action, Monitoring, and Reflection may seem simple, but the action component combined with an expectation of repetition through multiple cycles delivers a proactive methodological approach that stands apart from the more traditional objective contemplation approach.

The Temporal Factor

Depending on the nature of the issue being addressed, the multiple iterations that characterize an Action Research project can occur within hours, days or weeks. Kurt Lewin, the social psychologist who fled to the United States from Nazi Germany and became one of the founding fathers of this collaborative research methodology, believed that the power of Action Research lay in both the participation of all stakeholders as well as the changing dynamic that reduced the pressure to solve the problem in one study. Multiple attempts, with often the smallest adjustments at each iteration, he believed, could generate positive outcomes much faster than developing a complex model based on multiple hypotheses.

For this reason, Action Research has become the preferred methodology for onsite real-time research that needs direct input from the stakeholders who are most familiar with the variables of the situation. Rather than bringing in methodological experts who face a sharp learning curve in becoming familiar with the situational specifics, AR simplifies the methodology to facilitate a ‘trial-and-error’ pursuit of solutions onsite instead of building controlled environments (virtual or otherwise) offsite.

Limitations and Weaknesses

Critics argue that the perceived abandonment of the purity of the Scientific Method in order to achieve ‘quick and dirty’ workable solutions, limits the greater potential of Action Research:

- The *direct involvement of stakeholders*, often collect data while the issue being investigated is

happening in real time precludes the abstract objectivity that, it is argued, pure research needs in order to generate ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking.
- *Stakeholders receive minimal ‘on-the-job’ training* in basic research methodologies in order to collect data correctly, which brings the validity of the collected data into question.
- *Situational specificity* limits the extent to which accurate extrapolations can be made from the collected data.
- The *speed* with which many Action Research studies are completed raises further questions about the accuracy of the results.

It’s All about the Results

Proponents of Action Research and Participatory Action Research are equally dismissive of the criticism levied at this methodology. The collaborative approach combined with an action orientation built around multiple iterations, produces results. It may seem disconcertingly frenzied and amateur in its implementation, but if it works for the situation in which it is utilized, and produces the results that work for that situation, why should it be considered to be any less valid of an approach?

Category

1. Promoting Research
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