Insider action research doctorates: Generating actionable knowledge

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to contribute to understanding of the issue raised when executives do action research in their own organizations for doctorates. There are a number of significant challenges for those executives considering action research in their own organization, which are explored under the headings of, preunderstanding, role duality and organizational politics. The article reflects on the executive action research doctorate in terms of the engagement of the individual manager–researcher in first person inquiry, the collaborative activities with others in second person inquiry and the third person contribution of actionable knowledge to the practitioner and academic communities.

This article focuses on the phenomenon, within the realm of professional and practitioner doctorates, where middle to senior executives undertake doctoral research through an action research approach in and on their own organizations. This phenomenon occurs in schools of business, education, public administration, nursing, to name a few, and programmes are part-time in that participants combine their regular organizational jobs with study and research. Participants typically attend classes or seminars on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In these programmes participants undertake a research project as insiders of their own organizations, frequently through an action-oriented approach such as action learning and action research (Gosling and Ashton 1994; Adler et al. 2004; Coghlan et al. 2004; Coghlan and Brannick 2005). Such research aims at generating actionable knowledge, which can be defined as knowledge that is useful to both the academic and practitioner communities (Adler and Shani 2001). They also foster the development of the executives as practitioner–researchers (Jarvis 1999). While the rationale and exploration of these programmes are described (Perry and Zuber-Skerritt 1992, 1994; Zuber-Skerritt and Perry 2002), the 'insider' dynamics of the research undertaken in them is not. This

article seeks to contribute to the understanding of the issues in these programmes by exploring the largely neglected insider dynamics of the research processes undertaken by executives. It also aims to complement the burgeoning work being done on professional doctorates (Carnegie Foundation; Bourner et al. 2000; Lockhart and Stablein 2002; Scott et al. 2004).

The context for insider research, particularly insider action research is the strategic and operational setting that executives confront in their managerial working lives (Rynes et al. 1999). Issues of organizational concern, such as systems improvement, organizational learning, the management of change and so on are suitable subjects for action research, since (a) they are real events which must be managed in real time, (b) they provide opportunities for both effective action and learning, and (c) they can contribute to the development of theory of what really goes on in organizations.

Executives who undertake an action research project in and on their own organization do so while a complete permanent member, by which is meant, that they want to remain a member within their desired career path when the research is completed (Adler and Adler 1987). Insider action research has its own dynamics which distinguish it from an external researcher approach (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). The researchers are already immersed in the organization and have built up knowledge of the organization from being an actor in the processes being studied (Evered and Louis 1981). This knowledge comes from the actor engaging in the experiential learning cycles of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing and experimenting in real life situations (Kolb 1984; Raelin 2000). Riemer (1977) argues that rather than neglecting 'at hand' knowledge or expertise, researchers should turn familiar situations, timely events or special expertise into objects of study. Riemer's proposal for opportunistic research is appropriate for those researching their own organization, and in particular those engaging in action research in their own organization.

Action research

Shani and Pasmore (1985: 439) define action research.

> Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real

organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

Its central tenets can be expressed as follows (Argyris et al. 1985):

1. It involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.
2. It, like social management more generally, involves iterative cycles of identifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating.
3. The intended change in an action research project typically involves re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and action that are presently well-established in individuals and groups. A change intended by change agents is typically at the level of norms and values expressed in action.
4. It challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education.
5. It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not be to be sacrificed nor the relation to practice be lost.

The primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowing which is embodied in daily actions by the manager–researcher and the development of learning organizations and which aims to guide inquiry and action in the present (Reason 2001). Action research is collaborative in that it aims to enhance people's involvement in the generation of knowledge about them and their work and the actions they take. This is in keeping with the general understanding of the processes of organizational learning. Action research is rooted in each participant's experience of the situation, rather than being removed from it. Finally, action research is not grounded in formal propositions but is a human activity which draws on different forms of knowing. In researching the actions of everyday life, the challenge is to account for the changing nature of familiar situations. Recurring events or situations that involve meeting and working with people on a regular basis pose epistemological questions about common sense knowing (Lonergan 1957). An example of such questions is: what is different in this situation

from the previous situation in which the same people met and worked on the same issue? As Lonergan expresses it, there is always a question about what further insight is required to make judgements in new situations.

Insider action research

Insider action research is interventionist, as contrasted with the insider research which focuses on observation and analysis only and does not aim to change anything (Alvesson 2003). While many of the issues which apply to doing action research as an external agent pertain to insiders, there are a number of significant challenges for those executives considering action research in their own organization which I will explore under the following headings, preunderstanding, role duality and organizational politics (Coghlan, 2001, 2003; Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

Preunderstanding

'Preunderstanding refers to such things as people's knowledge, insights and experience before they engage in a research programme' (Gummesson, 2000: 57). The knowledge, insights and experience of the manager–researchers apply, not only to theoretical understanding of organizational dynamics, but also to the lived experience of their own organization. Outline some examples of such experience and preunderstanding. Executives have knowledge of their organization's everyday life. They know the everyday jargon. They know what is legitimate and taboo to talk about. They know what occupies colleagues' minds. They know how the informal organization works and whom to turn to for information and gossip. They know the critical events and what they mean within the organization. They are able to see beyond objectives which are merely window dressing. When they are inquiring they can use the internal jargon and draw on their own experience in asking questions and interviewing, and be able to follow up on replies and so obtain richer data. They are able to participate in discussions or merely observe what is going on without others being necessarily aware of their presence. They can participate freely, without drawing attention to themselves and creating suspicion.

There are also some disadvantages to being close to the data. When action research manager–researchers are interviewing they may assume

too much and so not probe as much as if they were outsiders or ignorant of the situation. They may think they know the answer and not expose their current thinking to alternative re-framing. They may find it difficult to obtain relevant data, because as a member they have to cross-departmental, functional or hierarchical boundaries or because as an insider they may be denied deeper access, which might not be denied an outsider. These pose considerable challenges to the manager–researcher and require rigorous introspection and reflection on experience in order to expose underlying assumptions and unreflected action to continuous testing which are at the heart of first and second person inquiry with respect to working with one's preunderstanding of one's own organization (Argyris et al. 1985; Torbert and associates 2004).

Role duality: organizational and researcher roles

When executives augment their normal organizational membership role with the research enterprise, it can be difficult and awkward, and can become confusing for them. As a result, in trying to sustain a full organizational membership role and the research perspective simultaneously, they are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims and identification dilemmas (Roth et al. 2004). This involves managing role duality and organizational politics (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). When executives augment their normal organizational membership role with the research enterprise, it can be difficult and awkward, and can become confusing for them. As a result, in trying to sustain a full organizational membership role and the research perspective simultaneously, they are likely to encounter role conflict and find themselves caught between loyalty tugs, behavioural claims and identification dilemmas.

Their involvement in the two roles affect their relationships with fellow organizational members (Adler and Adler 1987). The new dimension of their relationship to fellow organizational members sets them apart from ordinary members. Their organizational relationships are typically lodged and enmeshed in a network of membership affiliations. These friendships and research ties can vary in character from openness to restrictiveness. Manager action researchers are likely to find that their associations with various individuals and groups in the setting will influence their relationships with others whom they encounter, affecting the data that can be generated in engaging in second person inquiry and action with them. Probably the most important issue for

manager action researchers, particularly when they want to remain and progress in the organization is managing organizational politics.

Managing organizational politics

Undertaking an action research project in one's own organization is political and might even be considered subversive. Action research may be considered to be subversive because it examines everything. It stresses listening. It emphasizes questioning. It fosters courage. It incites action. It abets reflection and it endorses democratic participation. Any or all of these characteristics may be threatening to existing organizational norms. While action research manager may see themselves as attempting to generate valid and useful information in order to facilitate free and informed choice so that there will be commitment to those choices in accordance with the theory and practice of action research (Argyris and Schon 1996), they may find, as Kakabadse (1991) argues, that what constitutes valid information is intensely political.

Accordingly, action research manager–researchers need to be politically astute in deciding to engage in action research, becoming what Buchanan and Badham (1999) call a 'political entrepreneur'. In their view, this role implies a behaviour repertoire of political strategies and tactics and a reflective self-critical perspective on how those political behaviours may be deployed. Buchanan and Badham describe the management of the political role in terms of two activities, performing and backstaging. *Performing* involves the public performance role of being active in the change process, building participation for change, pursuing the change agenda rationally and logically, while backstage activity involves the recruitment and maintenance of support and the reduction of resistance. *Backstaging* comprises skills at intervening in the political and cultural systems, through justifying, influencing and negotiating, defeating opposition and so on. As we have seen, action research manager–researchers have a preunderstanding of the organization's power structures and politics, and are able to work in ways that are in keeping with the political conditions without compromising the project or their own career.

As action research manager–researchers engage in their project, they need to be prepared to work the political system, which involves balancing the organization's formal justification of what it wants in the project with their own tacit personal justification for political activity. Throughout the project they have to maintain their credibility as an

effective driver of change and as an astute political player. The key to this is assessing the power and interests of relevant stakeholders in relation to aspects of the project. Krim (1988) illustrates how the highly politicized nature of the organization in which he worked and in which he engaged in action inquiry for his doctorate made very heavy demands on his political skills for his own survival.

First, second and third person practice

Within action research there is a growing appreciation of the construct of first, second and third person inquiry/practice developed by Torbert (1998, Reason and Torbert, 2001) that provides a lens whereby individual inquiry and learning is implemented in collaborative with others and both then lead to dissemination to the impersonal third party audience. Action research doctoral programmes have the potential to exhibit the quality of the three voices/practices of action research that Torbert describes.

First person practice

First person inquiry–practice is typically characterized as the forms of inquiry–practice that one does on one's own. It fosters the ability of individuals to develop an inquiring approach to their own life, to act in ways that are informed, aware and purposeful. First person inquiry can take individuals 'upstream', when they inquire into their basic assumptions, desires, intentions and philosophy of life. It can also take them 'downstream', when they inquire into their behaviour, ways of relating, and action in the world. First person inquiry–practice typically finds expression in autobiographical writing: diaries, journals, records of dreams and so on. First person executive learning in action involving executives engaging in self-learning in action, learning to reflect, to engage in deep inquiry about themselves, their assumptions, their practices, how they grapple with their understanding of their organizations (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

Second person practice

Second person inquiry–practice occurs as individuals inquire with others into issues of mutual concern, through face-to-face dialogue and

conversation. Second person executive practice is collaborative with multiple stakeholders. Research-in-action in their own organizations involves work with others, for example, with their own management teams, project teams, external organization development and change (ODC) consultants and with executives of other organizations in the extended manufacturing enterprise (EME).

An important second person activity within doctoral programmes is the work with the academic supervisors, which provides insider-outsider collaboration and brings two perspectives and stakeholders into dialogue. Through a range of interventions which focus on enabling the manager–researchers to engage in inquiry, reflection, action and theorizing about their project in their organizational setting, academic supervisors facilitate the enactment of action research cycles on the action research project itself (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

Third person practice

Third person flows from the work at first and second person and constitutes the contribution that the research makes to an impersonal audience through dissemination and the extension of the learning and knowledge. Ideally, this audience can learn from the first and second person practice and position itself to actualize what is actionable.

Contribution to actionable knowledge

The question then arises, how do the action research projects of individual executives contribute to both the ongoing learning of the organizations in which these manager–researchers work and to the community of organizational scholars? What brings quality of actionable knowledge is that the work contains reflection on reflection (Argyris 2003) or meta-learning (Coghlan and Brannick 2005). Zuber-Skerritt and Perry (2002; Perry and Zuber-Skerritt 1992) make a useful distinction between the 'core' action research project and the 'thesis' action research project. The core action research comprises the organizational project that the manager–researcher is working on with organizational colleagues with an intended outcome of problem resolution or a change successfully implemented. The thesis action research project comprises the doctoral inquiry into the organizational project, which may or may not turn out to be successful in the terms defined by the core project. The thesis action

research project at doctorate level focuses on the development of theory through inquiry-in-action on the core action research project within the researcher's own organization. In other words, at the same time as action researchers are engaging in the project or core action research cycles, they need to be diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating about how the action research project itself is going and what they are learning. They need to be continually inquiring into each of the four main steps, asking how these steps are being conducted and how they are consistent with each other and, so, shaping how the subsequent steps are conducted.

Reflection is the process of stepping back from experience to process what the experience means, with a view to planning further action. It is the critical link between the concrete experience, the interpretation and taking new action. As Raelin (2000) discusses, it is the key to learning as it enables executives to develop the ability to uncover and make explicit to themselves what they have planned, discovered, and achieved in practice. He also argues that reflection must be brought into the open so that it goes beyond privately held taken for granted assumptions and helps executives to see how their knowledge is constructed. Mezirow (1991) identifies three forms of reflection, content, process and premise. These are useful categories. *Content* reflection is where executives think about the issues, what is happening, etc. *Process* reflection is where they think about strategies, procedures and how things are being done. *Premise* reflection is where they critique underlying assumptions and perspectives. All three forms of reflection are critical.

As Argyris (2003) argues, this inquiry into the steps of the cycles themselves is central to the development of actionable knowledge. It is the dynamic of this *reflection on reflection* that incorporates the learning process of the action research cycle and enables action research to be more than everyday problem solving. Hence it is learning about learning, in other word, meta-learning (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

This is what gives such insider action research its quality. The knowledge that emerges has the capacity to be actionable, that is, at the service of both the academic and practitioner communities. The integration of first, second and third person inquiry and practice is what gives insider action research doctorates their integrity. Levin (2003) argues that action research's contribution to scientific discourse is not a matter of sticking to the rigour-relevance polarity, but of focusing on vital arguments relating to participation, real-life problems, joint-meaning construction and workable solutions. The knowledge and practice that is generated comes from research-in-action (third person) that is grounded in individual

practitioner–researchers' own learning in action that is both individual (first person) and collaborative (second person).

Mode 2 research

Action research contains the potential to contribute actionable knowledge in terms of Mode 2 research (MacLean et al. 2002; Gustavsen 2003). The five attributes of Mode 2 research, as presented by Gibbons et al. (1994), may be developed in insider action research projects.

- *Knowledge is produced in the context of application.* Insider action research tends to be driven by some organizational imperative and knowledge is intended to be useful to the organization and so this imperative is present from the outset.
- *Research is transdisciplinary*, which means more than having a diverse range of expertise available. Insider action research engages those individuals and groups in the organization that need to be involved to solve the problem or address the issue. Such groups are transdisciplinary as they focus on the problem, develop distinctive evolving framework to guide problem-solving efforts and engage in dynamic processes of cycles of action and reflection.
- *Heterogeneity and organizational diversity* are illustrated by the less institutional nature of the research teams in that their composition is temporary and changes as the task requires and that they have membership across multiple sites and utilize networks of communication. In situations of complex organizational change and problem solving, executives engage with multiple groups which, change as particular issues needed to be confronted and resolved.
- *Social accountability and reflexivity* Because of the context of application there is a sensitivity to the impact of inquiry that is inbuilt from the outset and the actors are more reflexive because they are accountable to the organization.
- *Quality control* is structured in the context of application and set by a wide set of criteria.

Implications for programme design

From the above discussion, I'm identifying some implications for the design and implementation of insider action research executive doctoral

programmes that would utilize participants' managerial experience and real time change projects as action research dissertations. These implications need to be taken alongside other requirements of doctoral programmes, regarding quality of research, literature reviewed and so on.

Faculty need skills in working with action research

This may or may not involve a major philosophical orientation of some faculty to include action-oriented epistemology and training to work with action research in order to develop actionable knowledge.

Participating executives need to have a change project

within their own organizations for which they have some level of responsibility and which they can implement to a satisfactory degree during the programme.

Participants present progress reports to the class group and faculty on a regular basis

The action research structure is often an appropriate format: statement of the context and purpose, organizational and academic imperative for the study, what action was planned, what action was taken, what outcomes (intended and unintended) ensued and what evaluation was undertaken (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

These reports reflect cycles of action and reflection

The reports do not simply narrate a series of events but contain reflection on events, how they were interpreted and how interpretations shaped subsequent events. The reports reflect first and second person practice and aim to demonstrate how participants develop the skills of reflection-in-action from reflection-on-action. This engagement with cycles of action and reflection are key to the rigour and quality of inquiry-in-action (Coghlan and Brannick 2005).

The learning process focuses on content, process and premise reflection

The reflections lead to meta-learning regarding content, process and premise whereby what was done, how it was done challenges inquiry

into basic assumptions and knowledge and provide a third person contribution to existing knowledge.

Participants reflect on preunderstanding, role duality and organizational politics

Reflection on the dynamics of insider action research, such as how the manager–researchers managed closeness and distance, and their own experience of role duality and organizational politics contribute to both an understanding of the particular action research project itself and to a general understanding of the dynamics of insider action research.

Conclusions

In this article I have reflected on the executive action research doctorate in terms of how it illustrates a particular practice within action research, how the engagement of the individual manager–researcher in first person inquiry and the collaborative activities with others in second person inquiry lead to the third person contribution of actionable knowledge to the practitioner and academic communities. The aim of this article has been to contribute to understanding of the issue raised when executives do action research in their own organizations for doctorates and how this form of doctoral research contributes to actionable knowledge.

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