Action research

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Characteristics of action research

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Rapoport, 1970, p. 499, in Myers (living version)).

- Contributing to practical concerns of a group of people
- Contributing to theory development
- Collaboration with the concerned group
- Within a mutually acceptable ethical framework
- Diagnostic stage and therapeutic stage (Blum 1955 in Baskerville et al. 2002)

History of action research

- Originated in social psychology
  - Aim of instigating social change and empowerment of vulnerable groups
  - 2nd World War – returning soldiers and prisoners of war
  - Social and psychological interventions - learning by doing
- Used in education and the development field
  - Emancipatory education
  - Participatory development interventions

- Organizational studies and IS
  - Promoting improved organizational structure, learning, culture…
  - Developing better information systems, including new groups of users…
- Action research tradition in Scandinavian IS:
  - **70ies/80ies:**
  - NJMF project: Working with labor union to empower workers when digital information systems was introduced
  - Florence project: Developing digital work support system together with nurses
  - **Today**: HISP – health information systems in the Global South

Contributing to theory and practice

- Engagement in real world situations
  - Researching phenomenon in their context
- Contribute to practical matters, such as:
  - Solving a practical problem
  - Changing organizational structures
  - Stimulating empowerment, influencing organizational culture
- Contribute to theory development
 - Data collection
  - Analysis

A collaborative effort

- Participants and researchers collaborate
    - Define the problem/need for change together
    - Plan and execute the action together
    - Evaluate and reflect together
- A mutually acceptable ethical framework
    - Serving the interests of both researcher and participants
    - Mutual responsibility for the process
    - Data collection methods acceptable to both parties
    - On whose terms? Whose voices are heard?

An iterative cycle

- Diagnosing a problem, action planning, action taking, and evaluating outcomes.
- Evaluation may lead to a new diagnosis, cycle is repeated.
- Multiple methods, e.g.:
  - Interviews
  - Observations (passive, participant)
  - Document analysis (specifications, task descriptions, guidelines...)
  - Video/photo
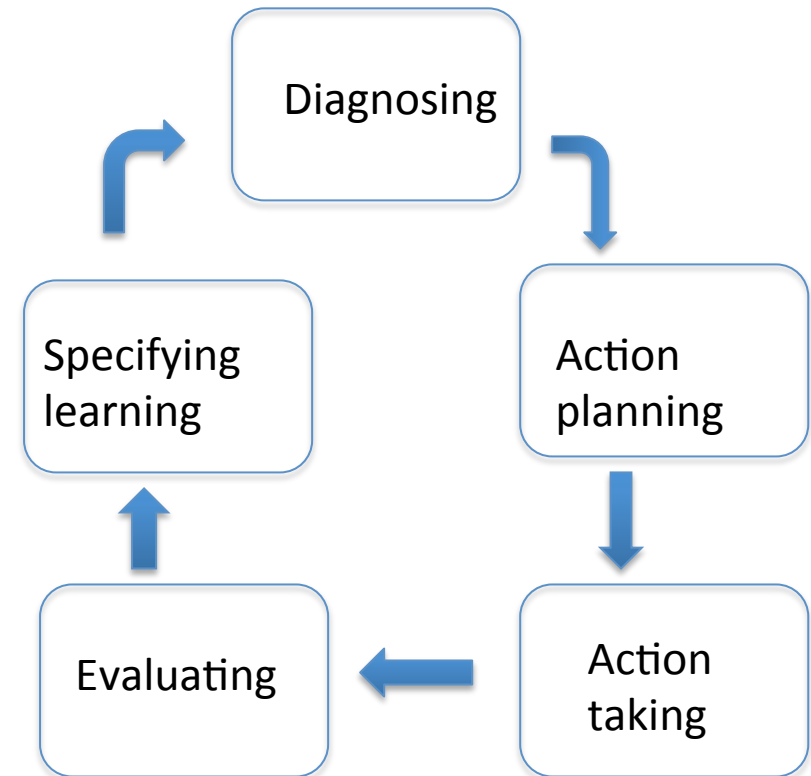
See Baskerville et. al 2002, p. 10

Epistemology – how is knowledge produced in action research?

- Can be positivist, interpretive or critical
- Co-construction of knowledge, knowledge through participation
- Researching a phenomenon that is changing, where the researcher contributes to change
    - Researcher's role may change over time
    - Calls for reflection on researcher's position
- How can we evaluate action research?
    - Recoverability (Checkland and Holwell 1998): Being transparent about methods, access/roles, data and analysis so the readers can assess the quality of the research
    - 'Catalytic validity' (Sykes and Treleaven): "proof of the pudding"
    - But: can be assessed differently (e.g., management vs. workers)

Action research vs. case study and ethnography

- Action research vs. **consultancy (non-scientific)**
  - Scientific methods for data gathering and analysis
  - Following ethical guidelines for research
  - Contribution to theory development as well as practice
- **Case study** vs. action research:
  - Less collaborative
  - Researcher chooses research questions, focus, and methods
  - Descriptive rather than prescriptive (may result in interventions, but not driven by interventions)
- **Ethnography** versus action research
  - Descriptive, not prescriptive
  - Explorative, not targeted
  - Instigating change may be an aim, but not in the form of interventions (rather: "giving marginalized groups a voice", "stimulating reflection in policy makers"
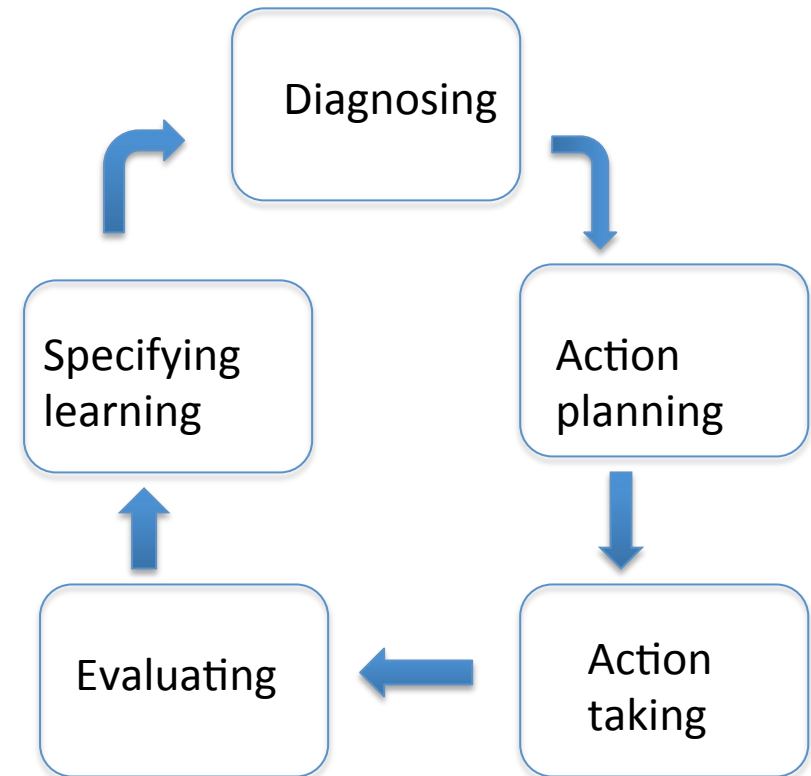
Critique and challenges

- More action than research? More research than action?
- Researchers' vested interests in some kinds of change over other
  - Will IS researchers accept an action plan that does not involve digital artifacts?
- Should researchers seek intervention? Difficult to control interventions – ethical concerns.
- On the other hand is it ethical for to *not* contribute to needed change?
- Power imbalances
  - Can participants afford to voice their real opinions?
  - Whose voices are heard? Communities represented by community leaders, dissidents marginalized in organizations
- Are values sufficiently addressed?
  - E.g., taking for granted that uptake of ICTs will stimulate development?
- A problem-oriented world view? Favoring change over stability?

Summary

- A methodology with the aim of contributing to practical concerns as well as theory development
- Collaboration between researchers and the concerned group
- Within a mutually acceptable ethical framework
- An iterative cycle: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluation, specifying learning, repeating if needed
- Prescriptive, explicit goal of changing something

Diagnosing

Action planning

Action taking

Evaluating

Specifying learning

See Baskerville et. al 2002, p. 10