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Action Research in Action: Involving Students and Professionals

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INTRODUCTION

The required Research Methods course in the MLIS (Master of Library and Information Studies) at The University of British Columbia has drawn a consistent cacophony of complaints during the past 15 years. For the three instructors involved at various times in the delivery of this course, these complaints have been a continuing problem: students have not complained about the quality of instruction, nor have they complained about the assignments. Instead, they questioned the relevance of the course itself to their imagined dream job somewhere in the information professions. Despite the instructors' repeated assurances that knowledge of research methodology was indeed necessary for today's information professional, the students remained unconvinced. As a Research Methods instructor myself, I listened patiently to student grumbling while searching for more convincing proof that doing research as a practicing professional was essential for a satisfying career and upward job mobility.

At the same time that I was deflecting student complaints, I was often deflecting requests from local practitioners to get involved in solving problems they encountered in their libraries. We are all busy in doing at least one and one-half jobs, and I could not envision how I could add applied research to the grant-funded basic research in which I was already engaged. However, the persistence of a local librarian who insisted that students would learn much from the

problem-solving exercise that she proposed, and the persistence of the students who clamored for “real-life” applicability of the research concepts they were studying in the Research Methods course led me to believe that my getting involved with a modified form of action research by putting the students and the professionals together might give me some peace.

ACTION RESEARCH: WHAT IS IT?

Action research is focused on problem solving through inquiry into human problems in a real context. It is fundamentally different from the research carried out in the laboratory where through the rigors of carefully defined variables and careful hypothesis testing researchers generate explanations and develop new theories. This type of research flourishes without the influence and interference of the community being examined, and the purpose and outcome of the experiments are often of little consequence to those being investigated. (Robson 2002, 215)

In contrast, action research, often called applied research, involves the community at all stages. In many cases, the research project has been prompted by a request from the community itself. According to Ernest Stringer, an Australian researcher, action research is “a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems. This approach to research favors consensual and participatory procedures that enable people (a) to investigate systematically their problems and issues, (b) to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations, and (c) to devise plans to deal with the problems at hand. Community-based action research focuses on methods and techniques of inquiry that take into account people’s history, culture, interactional practices, and emotional lives. Although it makes use of techniques and strategies commonly applied in the behavioral and social sciences, it is a more user-friendly approach to investigation than most.” ((Stringer 1999, 17)

Action research steps away from projects which aim to discover generalizable truths: it has a greater focus on the local context. According to Stringer, “... formal research operates at a distance from the everyday lives of practitioners, and ... largely fails to penetrate the experienced reality of their day-to-day work. The objective and generalizable knowledge embodied in social and behavioral research is often irrelevant to the conflicts [they] encounter. (Stringer 1999, 192)

Action research is sometimes characterized as the combination of theory and practice. Others describe the methodology as the link between the theory and practice, connecting thinking and doing and thereby achieving both practical and research objectives. (Susman 1983) But I prefer the characterization of Bjorn Gustavsen originally from the University of Oslo, who called action research the “mediating discourse” between the two often isolated discourses and professional communities involved in theory and practice. (Gustavsen 2001). This attempt by action research to straddle two arenas has engendered criticism from both sides, and contributed to the methodology’s checkered past.

BASIC STEPS IN ACTION RESEARCH

The steps for carrying out action research differ from subject to subject, but the basic procedure is:

First step – researchers observe the situation carefully, working with those at the research location to define and describe the problem to be investigated, along with a description of the environment or context of the problem situation

Second step – participants (the researchers and the community) analyze and interpret the situation to deepen their understanding of the background and extent of the problem, and to identify as well other players who may be implicated. A general review of the literature may be carried out at this step

Third step – participants plan an action that will lead to resolving the problem, carry out the action, and evaluate the results to assess whether the action led to the resolution of the problem. (Stringer 1999; Robson 2002)

THE ORIGINS OF ACTION RESEARCH

The research community in Europe has embraced action research much more widely than the North American community, despite the fact that the method was introduced in the U.S. by Kurt Lewin working in the late 1940s at the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the University of Michigan. Lewin was studying social psychology within the framework of field theory. In his work he required that any theories generated be fed back immediately into the research project – put into action, and that the researchers work with the subjects being studied in a much closer relationship than was previously seen in scientific inquiry. (Lewin et al, 1939) Lewin valued action research as a way of learning about organizations through his efforts trying to change them, to make them more responsive to employee needs. He saw action research as a way to strengthen democratic principles in the unsettled years after World War II, and this connection of action research with equality and justice has continued as the methodology has developed. (Wilkinson 1996, 216)

Another example of action research can be found in the early 1950s work of the London Tavistock Institute that targeted the need for worker-centered research before employers introduced new technologies into the workplace. The Tavistock researchers were motivated by their belief that their investigations should not only generate new knowledge, but should also lead to improvement in working conditions, which were often unsatisfactory in many British assembly line factories. According to Enid Mumford, this concern about applying their research results led the Tavistock group “to develop an approach and methodology which they called “socio-technical.” This meant that technology which, in their definition, covered both machines and the associated work organization, should not be allowed to be the controlling factor when new work systems were implemented. Equal attention must be paid to providing a high quality and satisfying work environment for employees.” (Mumford 2001, 12).

The association of action research with societal change has been both its strength and its weakness. Researchers who supported the methodology saw it as an important tool to study people and organizations in suppressed or under-represented communities with the goal of encouraging liberationist perspectives. (Borda 2001, 31) Those who rejected action research methodology criticized the strong social agenda which underpinned much research in this area in the 1970s. They criticized action research for its lack of rigor in following established basic research methods, and for the lack of impartiality shown by researchers who were communicating regularly with their research subjects during the projects. The “context-bound” nature of action research also prompted criticism, as this type of research is deeply embedded with a certain situation and produces results which cannot be repeated. (Baskerville and Wood-Harper 1996, 240-41)

CURRENT RESEARCH ARENAS

Despite concerns about this methodology, its use appears to be increasing in several sectors of information research. Studies of implementation and information-seeking related to information systems often employ action research methodology, as revealed in an entire issue of the journal *Information Technology and People* (2001, issue1). Action research is used frequently in the field of education: three excellent examples are projects that focused on the role of schools in information literacy (Barrett and Danks 2003), on web-based distance education (Knop and Lamaster 2004), and on collection management in a school library (Greenan 2002). Action research is also used frequently in medical studies; a good example of such a study appeared in the *Health Informatics Journal*, titled “Knowledge management in evidence-based healthcare: issues raised when specialist information services search for the evidence.” (Fennessy 2001) Overall analyses of the extent that this methodology has been used in information systems research can be found in two articles (Baskerville and Wood-Harper 1996; Lau 1999), but analysis of its use in library and information science research is scanty. Only one article - “Action Research and its Implication in Libraries” in the *Bulletin of the Library Association of China* could be located. (2002) It is hoped that this article can be translated so that it receives wider dissemination, and that more analyses are published.

IMPLEMENTATION IN RESEARCH METHODS COURSE LIBR 590

After gaining knowledge about action research methodology and its applications, I was ready to bring together the students in my Research Methods class and the librarians who wanted research carried out to solve problems in their libraries. The projects we have carried out have been very successful bridges between theory and practice, satisfying the students’ need to apply the theory learned in the Research Methods course, and satisfying the librarians’ need to acquire solid knowledge about ways to resolve problems in their libraries. I will briefly describe five projects which employed modified action research procedures. All the projects involved considerable communication and negotiation with the chief librarians, and in some cases considerable interaction with the staff as well. Because a librarian’s request or expressed need had precipitated each project, the project plan and the data-gathering method were worked out in lengthy consultations, taking into consideration the work schedule of each library and the needs and concerns of the staff.

A key working principle of action research is that the personal and social interactions between the researchers and those in the community are non-exploitative. The exercise enhances the professional and personal lives of those in the community because the researcher encourages personal cooperative relationships rather than interactions that are impersonal, competitive, or authoritarian. Too often we have carried out research in libraries that has little to do with the actual “life” of the staff or the role of the library. We have (sometimes unwittingly) imposed ourselves upon the institution, interviewing busy staff for lengthy periods, disrupting front-end library operations by surveying library customers, or (perhaps worse) not interacting at all with the staff or customers but gathering data and forming conclusions that are never relayed to the library staff at all. This situation leads to mistrust and annoyance on the part of the library staff,

as they feel exploited and unworthy. It was a clear goal of all my action research projects to avoid these unfortunate results.

Evaluation of Reference Services to Gay/Lesbian Youth and to International Students

Public librarians in the Vancouver area were concerned about reference services to gay/lesbian youth, while academic librarians were concerned about reference services to international students whose command of English, both in speaking and reading, was deficient. In both cases, students in the LIBR 590 class were eager to participate in carrying out these investigations, as they could clearly see relevance to future jobs. After clearly defining the problems in both areas and evaluating various methods of data-gathering, we decided in both cases to use the unobtrusive “mystery shopper” approach. This method involves a degree of deception, so considerable discussion with the chief librarian was required. In the first case, a young woman with the appearance of a teenager approached the reference desks of 20 different libraries and asked a gay/lesbian-related reference question. Immediately after the reference interaction, she noted her impressions on a record sheet of questions. The results of this research were quite startling, and will soon be published. In the second case, a student with heavily accented English approached the reference desks of 20 university/college libraries and asked the same complicated question. After the reference interview, the student recorded her impressions and detailed how closely the interview followed the guidelines for good reference service set out by the American Library Association. These results will also soon be published

Young Adult Public Library Use

When a local librarian approached me to ask “What do teenagers want their public library to be like?” I knew that another action research project could provide the answers. This librarian consulted extensively with the students and me about challenges she was experiencing in attracting teenagers to her library, and after debating various data-gathering methods, we decided to distribute questionnaires in the grade eight classes in schools nearest the library. This required considerable negotiation with the schools and the teachers, who became allies and participants in the project. The LIS students visited each class personally, spoke with the students, and administered the questionnaires. Over 300 responses were obtained, almost a 100% response rate, and the rich data have been extremely useful to both the public and school librarians in the area.

Academic Library Opening Hours

This project was prompted by a request from a UBC librarian who was considering closing her library an hour early – at 9 p.m. instead of 10 p.m. But she worried about inconveniencing students for whom this hour of library use might be crucial. To find out who the 9 to 10 p.m. library users were and what library activities they carried out, students from the Research Methods class interviewed over a two week period all users who exited the library during this evening hour. Armed with this information, the chief librarian was able to make an informed decision about whether or not to close the library early.

Public Library Branch Architecture

Because I teach a course in library planning, local librarians often ask me for advice when they embark on a new library project. One gap in both the local librarians’ knowledge and

in mine was what library customers liked or disliked regarding library buildings. When a librarian planning a new branch public library expressly lamented this lack of information to me, we decided to carry out some action research and gather information from the library customers. A group of students and I consulted with local librarians about architectural dilemmas they were facing and from this data, we constructed a questionnaire that we personally distributed to individual library customers in four new branch libraries. We asked for their opinions on features such as lighting, colour, study areas, parking, signage, and allowed for free flow of information in several open-ended questions. The over 400 customers who filled out the questionnaire were delighted to be asked their opinions and were very pleased that their answers would influence the architecture of future branch libraries. The results of this research were distributed to the libraries and at the request of the broader library community, were presented at a national Canadian library conference.

CONCLUSION

Practising information professionals routinely investigate problems within their libraries, but rarely do they have the time to organize a rigorous and sustained inquiry and analysis into the problem at hand. At the same time, students enrolled in library and information science classes rarely have the opportunity to experience first-hand the application of research techniques to a real-life library problem. Using the philosophy and procedures of action research, these two groups can work together to satisfy both needs. This cooperation requires that the principal researcher – the instructor of the students and the professional “colleague” of the practicing librarians - act as the “go-between,” making sure that neither students nor librarians feel exploited, and ensuring that everyone feels like a full contributor to the planning and execution of the project. In retrospect, my role in all the projects described can best be categorized as being a catalyst, showing both groups the way forward to meet their goals, but allowing both to influence and shape the project. Action research requires trust, openness, high tolerance for uncertainty and surprise, and a genuine desire on the part of all participants to improve library service. In my opinion, it deserves a closer look by LIS researchers.

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