

From: Hilary

Why do you choose to do Action Research

I have been drawn to Action Research because it allows me an opportunity to express my more action oriented side, i.e., that part of me that is good at working with others to make things happen. It's more satisfying for me to help create desired change, rather than merely observe life go by. At the same time taking an Action Research orientation allows me also to embrace a scholarly attitude to issues in organizational life. In a nutshell doing Action Research allows me to be more fully me as a scholar and as an action oriented person.

What brought you to this practice

As with everything there was some serendipity. I wanted to return to graduate school and a mentor suggested I read Peter Senge's Fifth Discipline and Chris Argyris Action Science. Through that I came to work at the MIT Center for organizational learning and be a part of action research in an organizational community. Then in graduate school I was introduced to Action Research concepts by Bill Torbert. And the icing on the cake so far was the invitation from Peter Reason to work on what became the Handbook of Action Research which led to the journal for which this article is being written. It's been a real cycle of action and reflection!

What keeps you involved?

I enjoy it, I like the company of those I meet in the work of action research. All my best friends are action researchers. Being engaged as an action researcher allows me – forces me – to spend time in the 'field,' with interesting business people, engaging especially with issues related to sustainability in the business world. And I find that my academic colleagues who are action researchers are all vibrant till the end of their careers – which is something I hope to emulate. Doing action research seems to have a sustaining quality.

On another, more philosophical level, action research offers me hope that we can move constructively beyond the fragmentation of inquiry and action that is commonplace in traditional social science and in society more generally. Embracing action research as an orientation to research has allowed me move beyond my frustration with the quietist tradition of social science, premised, I believe, on outmoded notions of objectivity. This premise, paradoxically, continues to draw its power from a Cartesian worldview that has been battered by the onslaught of postmodernist insights. Action research must draw power from the premises of pragmatism, the belief that we can know through doing. On a day to day basis, I lose sight of epistemology of course (though never on

Sunday!). Then there are the people, the relationships with those I admire and whose company I enjoy while working as an action researcher.

Issues, values, experiences, personal characteristics underlie my commitment?

Philosophically I have come to know myself as a pragmatist. In terms of experiential learning, and learning style, I realize I am particularly comfortable with knowing through doing, as much, if not more so, than knowing through conceptualization. I am interested in taking action, in experimenting with new ideas, interested in muddling through.

Stories, examples, illustrations

A current challenge I experience concerns how to reach more clarity about necessary phases of Action Research and the degree to which other modes of knowing (more traditional ones) are useful as part of this larger orientation. There is a place for example for traditional observation modes of learning – the question is whether we can think about these potential overlaps in more systematic ways and get away from an either/or approach to action research.

My own practice of action research is embedded in a multi year study of sustainable development that I have been involved with since 1996. Thankfully there has been some NSF funding (and it's great that such an esteemed body will give money to action research endeavors).

The study convenes a network of international business executives for the purposes of learning together through their challenges and successes about how to make their organizations more sustainable, i.e., attentive to issues of social and natural environment in which they do business. In that context I work with a few colleagues, gathering data about various aspects of this network and bringing it back to the group in such a way as to structure reflection and activate more desired outcomes. We have helped convene small groups who wish to focus on particular projects (e.g., one was called women leading sustainability). Another has been trying to understand (and create more of) desired network outcomes like collaboration across boundaries.