



Discovering
the Future Together:
Action Learning and
Action Research
at Work



*Workshop: Action Research as a Metamethodology:
Facilitating Actionable Knowledge*

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Acknowledgement of Country

As a reflection of the deep history and culture of Tasmania, I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners, the *palawa* (pronounced pal-a-wa) people of the land where this conference is being held; and pay my respect to elders past, present and emerging.

Intended Schedule

Time	Duration	Activity	By
15:45 to 15:50	5 mins	MC Intro	MC
15:50 to 16:00	10 mins	Participants Intro	All
16:00 to 16:20	20 mins	AR as a metamethodology	Shankar
16:20 to 16:45	25 mins	Group Discussions	Groups
16:45: to 17:00	15 mins	Feedback by groups	Groups
17:00 to 17:10	10 mins	Reflect together on AR as MM	All

Action Research as a MM in management

- Action research as a meta-methodology in the management field (Erro-Garcés & Alfaro-Tanco 2020)
- May be regarded as a meta-methodology or umbrella process (p.8)
- It is multidisciplinary that can use qualitative and quantitative methodologies and instruments (p. 8)
- As a method to gather diverse data (Coughlan & Coughlan 2002)
- Can subsume multiple processes to meet contrasting demands (Dick et al. 2015)
- Is a collaborative method to include different methods in different phases (Cordeito et al. 2017 & Denis & Lehoux 2009)
- Is not closely linked to the specific problems but is related to the 'context' in which AR is being conducted (p.9)

AR as a MM from action researchers

- Meta-Methodology (Attwater 2014)
 - The researcher learns the way into the details and complexity of the situation of interest
 - Requires a a critical appreciation of methodological underpinnings and implications
 - Enables a more systemic and multilayered inquiry into real-solutions and issues
- Engaging communities of practice for risk communication in the Hawksbury Water Recycling Scheme (Attwater & Berry 2005)
- Value co-creation with stakeholders using action research as a meta-methodology in a funded research project. (Dick et al. 2015)
- Investigating collaboration in project management research: Using AR as a meta-methodology (Sankaran et al. 2020)

AR as a Metamethodology in an ARC Linkage Project

- Create a leadership capability framework for not-for-profits
 - Context: Aged and community care
 - Faith-based organizations
- Three universities and two not-for-profit organizations
- Challenge of a large applied project study over three years
 - Standard project management processes do not work due to inherent complexity (dynamic and socio-political)
 - At the start funders and ethics committees expect a clear plan of what is intended
 - As research evolves researchers find that stakeholder expectations are becoming clearer
 - This requires being responsive and adapting to the emergent realities

Process



Use of AR as a metamethodology

- We were a diverse research team with different perspectives.
- But we took advantage of the diversity to develop an AR orientation
- We engaged in collaborative meetings (formal and informal) to develop common ground despite our differences
- Our diverse experience helped us to devise effective processes at each stage and adapt them as required
- The complexity of the research required flexibility between what the funding bodies asked for and what the stakeholders actually needed
- To meet these conflicting demands AR as a metamethodology helped
- It also helped that we had action researchers in our steering committee set up to govern the project who guided us.

Surprises



Although we set out to test a leadership framework developed at the pilot it played a minor role during the main study to achieve our research outcomes



At most points in our study we thought that our partners needed tangible outputs such as a training manual or process



As we progressed, we learnt that stakeholders wanted an evidence-based approach to leadership development that included selection, development and retention strategies



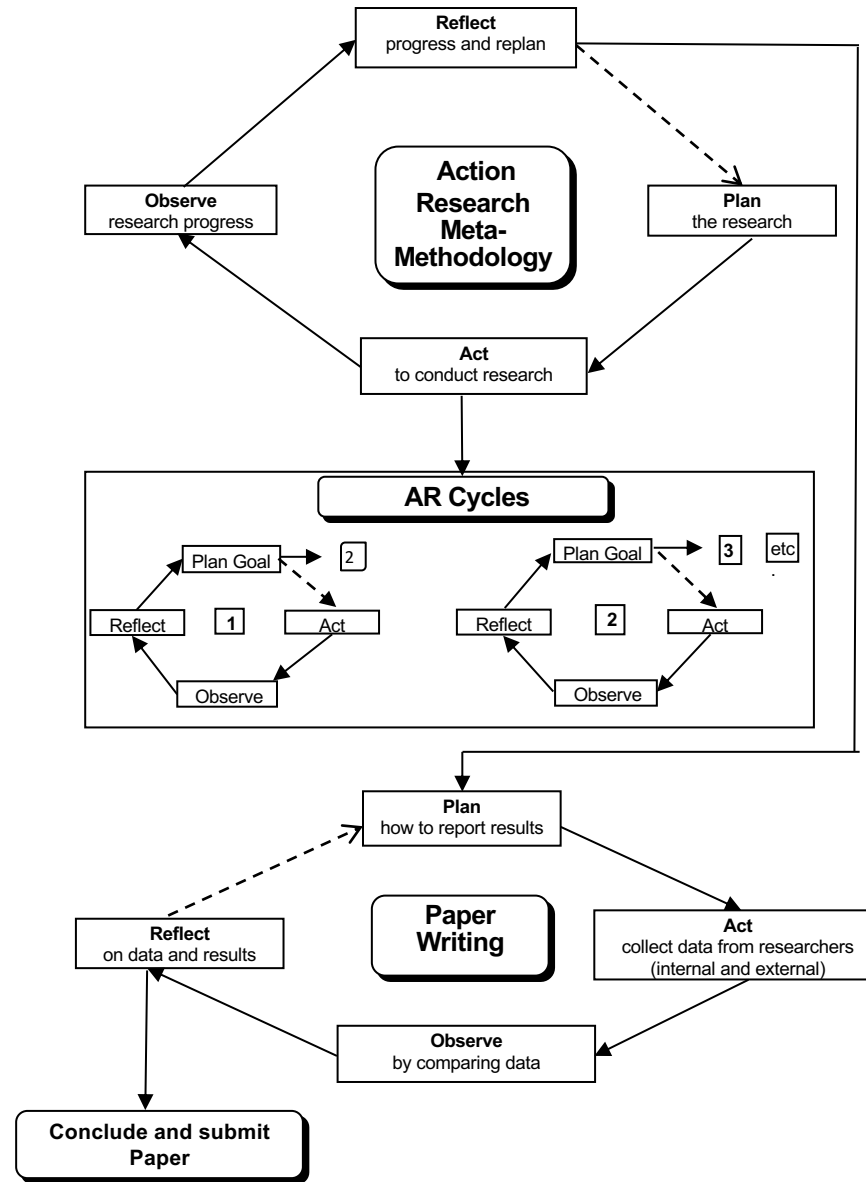
Our commitment to actionable goals guided us towards goals which were beneficial for the industry partners and used by them

Adaptations

- Use of scenario planning rather than use a search conference
- Twice we revisited the literature in response to emergent findings
- Expanded or refined information from previous elements
- Responding to unexpected events
 - A large email survey was conducted opt gain generalisability
 - Response was inadequate
 - Conducted a Delphi survey in which we added questions
- Modification of questions during convergent interviews

Investigating collaboration in project management research: Using action research as a metamethodology

- Project Management Sponsored Research Grant (Two years)
 - Global CI's Ralf Mueller (Norway), Nathalie Drouin (Canada) & Shankar Sankaran (Australia)
 - Investigated the balance between person-centred and team-centred leadership in projects
 - Carried out case studies in nine countries. At the peak 26 researchers participated
 - Case studies (five in each country) were followed by a survey
 - Resulted in more publications than we anticipated
 - Won an international research award
 - Helping organizations implement balanced leadership in projects
- Publishing a book on Balanced Leadership in 2021 by Oxford University press



Adapted from Perry & Zuber-Skerrit (1991: 76)

Cycles

- Cycle 1 – Pre-award work
 - Piloted 3 cases in China and Australia
 - Modified research protocol to add senior managers
 - Identified the existence of socio-cognitive space
- Cycle 2 – Midpoint review in Oslo
 - Mystery construction to develop theory abductively
 - Divided up publications based on theory (five events)
- Cycle 3 – Reaching the finishing line
 - Research completed successfully on time
 - Other researchers started publishing

Challenges

- Questioned 'How it is AR?' in Special track on AR at EURAM conference
- Realized that we had unconsciously used an action research like process
- Submitted paper for a special issue using AR as methodology
- One reviewer kept rejecting the paper bringing up new objections
 - Would not accept this as an AR contribution
 - Made us change it to mixed methods (we used multimethod)
 - Objected to using narratives
 - Still rejected the paper asking for dependent and independent variables
 - Surprised to find a positivist lens to our study
- We almost gave up resubmitting and decided to publish it elsewhere
- Appealed to special issue guest editors
- Accept with minor changes! (on early cite now 😊)



Group Reflection

- What is a metamethodology? How does doing action research fit your definition?
- Would a post reflection on a project using action research qualify as a metamethodology?
- How can we use a meta-methodology to create actionable knowledge?
- Open question



References

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