IS ACTION RESEARCH: CAN WE SERVE TWO MASTERS?

1. ACTION RESEARCH AND IS

A key characteristic of action research (AR) sets it apart from other research approaches. In AR, investigators try to fulfill the needs of their study subjects and, at the same time, generate new knowledge. As such, IS action researchers have to serve two masters: their immediate research clients, who directly benefit from the research while it is being conducted, and the IS academic community in general. The goal of this panel is to discuss the pros and cons of AR’s dual goal in the context of IS studies.

AR has been considered a distinctive form of research since the early 1940s. Kurt Lewin is generally regarded as one of its pioneers and the first person to use the term “action research” to refer to a specific research approach in which the researcher generates new knowledge about a social system, while at the same time attempting to change it. A distinctive thrust of AR also developed, after World War II, at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London as a method to deal with social and psychological disorders arising from prison camps and battlefields. In the field of IS, AR has been used only since the 1980s and the number of published examples in academic journals is very small.

One of the reasons for the emergence of AR and its subsequent use in the IS field is the recognition, largely motivated by the early work of ethnographers, that a research environment can be more deeply understood if the researcher becomes part of that environment. This can be achieved through the researcher becoming an agent of change in the environment, as usually is the case in AR in general. The involvement of the researcher with the environment under study is also believed to foster cooperation and candid information exchange between the researcher and those who are being studied well beyond what can be expected in traditional research approaches, such as experimental, survey and even case research. This, in turn, can increase the validity of research findings.

2. IS ACTION RESEARCH: PROS

Arguments in favor of the use of AR in IS can be summarized as follows:

- The high involvement of the researcher with the research subjects allows for access to rich and in-depth research data.
- Since the topic of the research is partly selected by the client (e.g., a company in a specific industry), its findings are likely to be of high relevance to at least a section of the practitioner community (e.g., the immediate research client and other companies in the same industry).
The real world orientation of the approach offers a singular opportunity to recruit part-time doctoral students who hold positions in organizations facing a problem whose solution can lead to relevant research findings. The problem-solving orientation of the research increases chances of obtaining research funding.

3. IS ACTION RESEARCH: CONS

The potential disadvantages of using AR for IS research are as follows:

- If the researcher does not have close ties with at least one organization, it is often hard to gain access to a site where the researcher can act as an agent of change.
- The amount of time that has to be committed by the researcher is very large compared with other research approaches.
- If the research is funded by an organization, conflicts of interest may detract from the credibility of reported findings.
- The high involvement of the researcher with the study subjects can influence their perceptions and actions and therefore bias research findings.
- Research projects may take too long to be completed, which may hinder the adoption of the research approach by doctoral students, particularly in programs that follow the American model.
- In spite of their likely relevance to practitioners, it is hard to publish research results in top IS journals.

4. PANEL DISCUSSION

This panel will address issues related to the pros and cons above and provide a basis on which researchers can decide whether they should conduct IS AR and, if their decision is positive, deal with the difficulties inherent in this research approach. The panel chair and three panelists (Avison, Baskerville, and Wood-Harper) have extensive experience conducting IS AR, advising doctoral students conducting IS AR, and publishing related research findings. One panelist (Myers) has made notable methodological contributions to qualitative research, which have included defining IS AR and contrasting it with other IS research approaches. The panel format includes two main segments, introduction and definition of IS action research and presentations and debate, both described below.

4.1 Introduction and Definition of IS Action Research

This segment will start with Ned Kock providing a brief three minute introduction of the panel and the panelists. Michael Myers will then provide a definition of IS AR and contrast it with other research approaches. At this point the presentations and debate segment of the panel will begin.

4.2 Presentations and Debate

In this segment, three panelists will discuss issues related to the conduct of IS AR in ten minute presentation modules, illustrating their discussion with examples based on their own experience as IS AR practitioners. At the end of each speaker presentation, Ned Kock and Michael Myers will play the “devil’s advocate” role, emphasizing difficulties in conducting IS AR and inviting the speaker and the audience to provide their opinions regarding the difficulties raised. The speakers and IS AR content discussed are as follows:

- David Avison will address issues related to gaining access to a site to conduct IS AR and time management in IS AR projects.
- Richard Baskerville will discuss issues related to obtaining funding from client organizations and the related impact on research credibility.
- Trevor Wood-Harper will talk about researcher involvement with subjects and the related impact on research validity, conducting IS AR as a doctoral student, and getting published in top IS journals.
Panel attendants will be given the opportunity to ask questions at any time during or between individual presentations. In the remainder of the allotted time for this panel, the panelists will answer questions from the audience.

5. PANEL WEB SITE

Given the complexity of the topic and the limited time available at the conference, a Web site has been created to provide additional information and extend this panel discussion beyond the conference:

http://ww2.cis.temple.edu/kock/ICIS99/ISARpanel/

6. ABOUT THE PANEL MEMBERS

Ned Kock is an assistant professor in the Department of Computer and Information Sciences, Temple University. He holds a Ph.D. in information systems from the University of Waikato, New Zealand. Ned’s Ph.D. research employed action research to analyze the impact of asynchronous group support systems on process improvement groups. He is the author of two scholarly books, including Process Improvement and Organizational Learning: The Role of Collaboration Technologies (Idea Group Publishing), and several articles in journals such as Communications of the ACM, Journal of Organizational Computing and Electronic Commerce, Information & Management, Information Systems Journal, and Information Technology & People. Ned is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Systems and Information Technology and the Journal of Information Technology Cases and Applications. He has been working as a systems analyst and organizational development consultant since 1987, having provided consulting and systems development services to a number of organizations including PricewaterhouseCoopers, Johnson & Johnson, Rio de Janeiro State Construction Company, Westaflex, New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, True North and Day & Zimmermann.

David Avison is a professor of information systems at Southampton University, UK, and a visiting professor at ESSEC, France. He earned his Ph.D. in information systems at Aston University using action research in information systems development. He is currently vice chair of IFIP 8.2 on the organizational and societal impact of information systems and immediate past president of the UK Academy for Information Systems. He has authored 18 books on information technology and information systems as well as many research papers and has held a wide variety of consulting positions. His action research (which led to the development and refinement of the Multiview approach with Trevor Wood-Harper) has been widely published, most recently in Communications of the ACM and Information Technology & People.

Richard L. Baskerville is an associate professor of information systems in the Department of Computer Information Systems, College of Business Administration, Georgia State University. His research specializes in security of information systems, methods of information systems design and development, and the interaction of information systems and organizations. His interests in methods extends to qualitative research methods. Baskerville is the author of Designing Information Systems Security (J. Wiley) and many articles in scholarly journals, practitioner magazines, and edited books. He is an associate editor of The Information Systems Journal and MIS Quarterly, and a member of the editorial boards of The European Journal of Information Systems and The Information Resources Management Journal. Baskerville’s practical and consulting experience includes advanced information system designs for the U.S. Defense and Energy Departments. He is currently chair of the IFIP Working Group 8.2, a Chartered Engineer under the British Engineering Council, a member of The British Computer Society, a and Certified Computer Professional by the Institute for Certification of Computer Professionals. Baskerville holds degrees from the University of Maryland (B.S. summa cum laude, Management), and the London School of Economics, University of London (M.Sc., Analysis, Design and Management of Information Systems, and Ph.D., Systems Analysis).

Michael D. Myers is an associate professor in the Department of Management Science and Information Systems at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests are in the area of information systems development, qualitative research methods in information systems, and the social and organizational aspects of information technology. His papers have appeared in a wide range of journals, including Accounting, Management and Information Technologies, Communications of the ACM, Ethics and Behavior, Information Systems Journal, Information Technology and People, Journal of Information Technology, Journal of
Management Information Systems, MIS Quarterly, and MISQ Discovery. He is co-author of two books, including New Zealand Cases in Information Systems (with J. Sheffield, Pagination Publishers, 2nd edition, 1992). Dr. Myers is Editor of the ISWorld Section on Qualitative Research, an Associate Editor of the Information Systems Journal, an Associate Editor of MIS Quarterly, and on the Editorial Boards of Communications of the AIS, Information Technology & People, and Journal of Systems and Technology.

Trevor Wood-Harper is a professor of information systems and Director of the Information Systems Research Centre (ISRC) in the Information Systems Institute at the University of Salford, UK. He is also a visiting professor of MIS at the University of South Australia. He has co-authored 11 books and monographs as well as more than 130 research articles on a wide range of topics including the Multiview methodology, action research, business process re-engineering, ethics in systems development, fundamentals of information systems, and doctoral education. These papers have been published in such journals as Communications of the ACM, Information Technology and People, The Computer Journal, Information Systems Journal, European Journal of Information Systems, and the Journal of Information Technology. Wood-Harper set up (in 1990) one of the first information systems doctoral schools (a combination of the European and American styles) in the UK, which is attracting an increasing number of international as well as British students. Currently the school has more than 30 Ph.D. students. He has successfully supervised 16 doctoral students and acted as an external examiner for more than 30 Ph.D. theses in the UK, South Africa, Norway, and Australia.