Exploiting the Reach to Explore the Richness in Inter-organizational Action Research

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Exploring and exploiting the richness and reach of large scale action research projects is a challenge. This challenge focuses inwards as it addresses critical issues of enacting, managing and coordinating the actions of the project and engaging in the reflective processes of learning-in-action and knowledge generation by multiple actors and groups engaged in the project. It simultaneously focuses outwards as it seeks to exploit both the processes of the action research itself and the dissemination of actionable knowledge to multiple audiences. This article describes and reflects upon the challenges of exploring and exploiting richness and reach arising in the CO-IMPROVE project, a European Union (EU) funded initiative involving action research in complex networks of academics and business. The objectives of CO-IMPROVE included the facilitation of collaborative improvement of operations practice and performance in the extended manufacturing enterprise through action research among both managers and academics.

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Actionable knowledge in a collaborative situation does not arise of its own accord. While latent in the collaborative actions of the actors, it may be overwhelmed by the complexity of inter-organizational relationships and processes. Expressed differently, issues of exploitation and exploration arise in relation to the richness in the situation. These are established pairs of