

Book Review

**David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick (2009):
Doing Action Research in Your Own Organisation**
Sage, London 2010, (3rd edition), \$ 44.95, € 27.99 (amazon),
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Reviewed by Richard Ennals

This new edition of a popular text, used by researchers and practitioners, focuses attention on central issues in Action Research. David Coghlan has been an active participant in many of the separate traditions of Action Research. Both he and his co-author Teresa Brannick teach in University Business Schools in Dublin, moving Action Research into the mainstream. This new edition takes the opportunity to refer to the latest literature in a fast-growing and diverse field. It provides a valuable foundation for new researchers in the field.

There has been a separate literature, for example dealing with Educational Action Research (Noffke/Somekh 2009; McNiff/Whitehead 2009), with a focus on the individual reflective practitioner. By contrast we can point to work on Action Research and Organisational Renewal, which has included consideration of major managed programmes (Gustavsen et al. 2001; Levin 2002; Fricke/Totterdill 2004) which have deployed Action Research in order to pursue policy objectives. This has raised questions as to how Action Research is itself to be defined (Greenwood/Levin 2007).

At this point we may have concluded that what different instances of Action Research have in common is that they are cited as instances of Action Research. There are family resemblances. However, readers of earlier editions of works in the field (e.g. Reason/Bradbury 2001) will have noticed limited cross-citations of literature from other traditions. Coghlan and Brannick have made a welcome contribution, both in the breadth of their refer-

ences, and in the platform which they provide for further debate and development.

The title of the book deals with Action Research in one's own organisation. The implication is that such research is not necessarily part of a larger scale managed programme. Reliance is not to be placed on research expertise from outside.

The authors define Action Research as "an approach to research which aims at both taking action and creating knowledge or theory about that action. The outcomes are both an action and a research outcome, unlike traditional research approaches which aim at creating knowledge only". They set out the cyclical process of planning, taking action, and evaluating. They emphasise the collaborative dimension, whereby the members of the system which is being studied participate actively in the cyclical process. They highlight the diversity of approaches.

The focus is on the combination of organisational roles with the additional demands of a role of inquiry and research. This raises practical challenges such as the selection of a research question, attaining some sense of objectivity, and choice of frameworks for viewing and understanding the data.

Action Research work can be undertaken for different reasons, including securing academic qualifications, with some expectation of benefit for the organisation. Action Research can involve dealing with emergent processes, and leading radical change, which requires a capacity for self-reflection, realistic expectations, self-containment and an ability to learn.

The book is intended to complement books exploring the theory and practice of action research (Greenwood/Levin 2007; Reason/Bradbury 2008; Shani et al. 2008). The three sections of the book cover "Foundations", "Implementation", and "Issues and Challenges in Researching Your Own Organisation". The book ends with discussion of closeness and distance with respect to the organisation under study, contexts of politics and ethics, and hints on writing an Action Research Dissertation.

The style of the book is clear and non-dogmatic, making good use of diagrams and summaries. Researchers and research students will have encountered scepticism about Action Research, and arguments that more traditional approaches are "safer", in the context of the need for academic recognition.

There is a robust account of Action Research, as “using a scientific approach to study the resolution of important social or organisational issues together with those who experience these issues directly.”

Taking the traditional distinction between first, second and third person research, they set out what needs to be integrated in an Action Research project.

First person research is typically characterised as a form of inquiry and practice that one does on one’s own, and so addresses the ability of the individual to foster an inquiring approach to his or her life, to act out of awareness and purposefully.

Second person inquiry / practice addresses the ability to inquire into and work with others on issues of mutual concern, through face to face dialogue, conversation and joint action.

Third person inquiry / practice aims at creating communities of inquiry, involving people beyond the direct second person action.

The book highlights the inherent radicalism of Action Research, in that it advocates replacing existing forms of social organisation. It challenges normal science in several action-oriented ways.

“Sharing the power of knowledge production with the researched subverts the normal practice of knowledge and policy development as being the primary domain of researchers and policy-makers. Action Researchers work on the epistemological assumption that the purpose of academic research and discourse is not just to describe, understand and explain the world, but also to change it. The issue is not so much the form of the knowledge produced or the methodology employed to gather data / evidence, but who decides the research agenda in the first place, and who benefits directly from it.”

This last point, concerning power, could bring together the Emancipatory Action Research traditions from the South, such as Latin America (Freire 1970; Streck 2005; Cendales et al. 2005) and the apparently more instrumental approaches to organisational change in the North, such as Scandinavia. Indeed, the earlier 2005 edition of Coghlan and Brannick is cited in Novaes et al 2009. Younger researchers on the EDWOR (Enterprise Development and Working Life) PhD programme at NTNU Trondheim, based on Action

Research, have seen power as a central issue, and Coghlan has served as a thesis opponent.

By definition, Coghlan and Brannick's project continues, particularly if our reference is to the current Action Research community. Having constructed the central pillar for a bridge between traditions, in a fourth edition Coghlan and Brannick may venture a bit further on either side, linking work in Latin America and Scandinavia. However, there is no need for all-encompassing agreement. It is a matter of self-determination. As they state in the title, the focus is on "Action Research in Your Own Organisation".

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