

Creating Action Research Quality in Organization Development: Rigorous, Reflective and Relevant

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Abstract The purpose of the paper is to present a framework that enables action researchers to create quality action research projects within the organization development (OD) domain using the broad criteria of being rigorous, reflective and relevant and so contribute to the realm of practical knowing. What constitutes good quality action research within OD is a difficult question, given the broad range of approaches that operates in a wide variety of settings and with great diversity. It advances specific dimensions by which action researchers can create, review and assess quality in action research work. This integrative framework and criteria are practical tools to enable action researchers to create quality action research in OD.

Keywords Action research · Organization development · Quality creation · Practical knowing

Introduction

What constitutes good quality action research within organization development (OD)? What criteria might action researchers use to create and deliver a project? These are not easy questions to answer as there is no consensus on any one answer. Indeed there may be disagreement. This is because there is no single version of action research where one set of criteria might be considered definitive. Action research is considered to be a family of

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approaches that operates in a wide variety of settings and with great diversity and so criteria may need to be approach specific (Reason and Bradbury 2008). This article focuses on one setting, namely, OD, and frames an integrative framework to enable action researchers create quality as they construct, design, facilitate and deliver their action research work. A central assumption underpinning this paper is that action research seeks to contribute to both action though problem solving or developing a change initiative and to the creation of practical knowing. Accordingly, this paper holds that publishability is integral to the research dimension of action research, whether or not a publication is actually intended or attempted.

Action Research in OD

Action research is one of the distinctive features of OD and one of its core origins (Schein 1989; French and Bell 1999; Pasmore 2001; Bradbury et al. 2008; Coghlan 2012; Klev and Levin 2012). As a collaborative, interventionist form of research OD is grounded in its Lewinian roots in the scholarship of practice (Burnes and Cooke 2012). For Lewin, it was not enough to try to explain things; one also had to try to change them. This insight led to the development of action research and the powerful notion that human systems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself. So the tradition of involving the members of an organization in the change process which is the hallmark of OD originated in a scientific premise that this is the way (a) to get better data and (b) to effect change (Schein 1989). Action research was based on two assumptions which are the cornerstones of OD. One is that involving the clients or learners in their own learning, not only produces better learning but more valid data about how the system really works. The other is that one only understands a system when one tries to change it, as changing human systems often involves variables which cannot be controlled by traditional research methods.

Action research used in OD is based on collaboration between the behavioral-scientist–researcher and the client where they collaborate on intervening in the organization (the action) and in exploring issues and generating data on the development of the organization (the research activity). They develop action plans to address the issues and implement them. Together they evaluate the outcomes of the actions, both intended and unintended. This evaluation may then lead to further cycles of examining issues, planning action, taking action and evaluation. Cyclical–sequential phases may be identified that capture the movements of collaboration through planning and action to evaluation and to theory generation. These activities may serve also to generate new behavioral science knowledge, which is fed into the depository of information for other behavioral scientists as general laws, types of issues or the process of consultant-client collaboration, thus addressing issues beyond the specific case. Through its Lewinian roots in the scholarship of practice, OD has the capacity to bridge the rigor-relevance, theory–practice debates that beset contemporary organization studies (Burnes and Cooke 2012; Bartunek and Woodman 2012). Accordingly, action research is not only a methodology and a set of tools but is also a theory of social science (Peters and Robinson 1984). Its roots are in science and Lewin built a cadre of colleagues and students whose work in group dynamics and organizational research became the foundation for what emerged later as OD. While OD and action research are closely related, they exist independently of one another and there are important roots and strands of action research existing outside of OD (McArdle and Reason 2008).

Characteristics of Action Research

Within the wide variety of approaches to and definitions of action research that can be found within the field, we are working from Shani and Pasmore's definition that for us captures the essence of action research in the OD context.

Action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry (1985: 439).

Working from this definition, we are identifying the critical themes that constitute action research: that as an *emergent inquiry process* it engages in an unfolding story, where data shift as a consequence of intervention and where it is not possible to predict or to control what takes place. It focuses on *real organizational problems* or issues, rather than issues created particularly for the purposes of research. It operates in the people-in-systems domain and *applied behavioral and organizational science knowledge* is both engaged in and drawn upon. Action research's distinctive characteristic is that it addresses the twin tasks of bringing about *change in organizations* and in generating robust, actionable *knowledge*, in an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of *collaboration and co-inquiry*, whereby research is constructed *with* people, rather than *on* or *for* them. Further characteristics are that it seeks to contribute to the realm of practical knowing including decisions and actions by practitioners in order to improve situations and that it involves researching in the present tense. Accordingly, engagement in the cycles of action and reflection perform both a practical and philosophical function in its attentiveness and reflexivity as to what is going on at any given moment and how that attentiveness yields purposeful action and actionable theory.

Shani and Pasmore (1985) present a complete theory of the action research process in terms of four factors.

- *Context* these factors set the context of the action research project. Individual goals may differ and impact the direction of the project, while shared goals enhance collaboration. Organizational characteristics, such as resources, history, formal and informal organizations and the degrees of congruence between them affect the readiness and capability for participating in action research. Environmental factors in the global and local economies provide the larger context in which action research takes place.
- *Quality of relationships* the quality of relationship between members of the system and researchers is paramount. Hence the relationships need to be managed through trust, concern for other, equality of influence, common language and so on.
- *Quality of the action research process itself* the quality of the action research process is grounded in the dual focus on both the inquiry process and the implementation process.
- *Outcomes* the dual outcomes of action research are some level of sustainability (human, social, economic ecological) and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of actionable theory through the action and inquiry.

Before we discuss these areas, we note some critical features of action research in OD that underpin the approach to assessing quality in action research in OD. Our first feature is

that action research in OD seeks to generate practical knowing. There are different forms of knowing, what Reason and Torbert (2001) refer to as an extended epistemology, which includes propositional or scientific knowing and practical knowing. Toulmin (1990) has pointed out that as the rational became the focus of modernity to the exclusion of the humanistic, practical knowing became excluded from scholarship as after the seventeenth century as philosophers turned to problems of the objectivity of knowing. This was a shift from knowing in a descriptive mode to knowing in explanatory mode where things were no longer presented in relation to the knowing subject but were related to one another in recurring patterns.

There is a problem about the use of the term ‘science’ in relation to action research (Cassell and Johnson 2006). ‘Science’ is defined typically in terms of a particular form of knowledge articulated by positivist norms. But as Putnam (1978) argues there is more to knowing than scientific knowing and that, in his view, it is a cultural necessity to include practical knowing in our efforts to understand ourselves and science. In action research theory and action are interlinked inextricably, each feeding into the other in recurrent systemic cycles (Levin 2012).

The realm of practical knowing, as contrasted with that of scientific knowing which seeks to create universal knowledge, directs us to the concerns of human living and the successful performance of daily tasks and discovering solutions that work (Lonergan 1992; Coghlan 2011). It is particular, contextual and practical and it changes with every situation as what is familiar in one place may be unfamiliar in another and what works in one setting may not work in another. Therefore, practical knowing is always incomplete and can only be completed by attending to figuring out what is needed in situations in which one is at a given time. As no two situations are identical we reason, reflect and judge in a practical pattern of knowing in order to move from one setting to another, grasping what modifications are needed and deciding how to act.

Dick et al. (2009) discuss that terms like ‘theory’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ are synonymous, with theory being the ‘grand’ term for the activities of knowing, understanding and making sense. In this article, we are using the term *practical knowing* as a term that encompasses notions like ‘knowing how’ and ‘actionable knowledge’. Focusing on knowing rather than knowledge enables attention to how we know rather than what we know and allows the philosophical and practical activities of action and reflection to be described as action researchers articulate the operations of their experience, their understanding, their judgments and their actions (Meynell 1998; Coghlan 2011). Accordingly we are focusing on quality, defined in process terms of being rigorous, reflective and relevant, rather than on scientific outcome.

Our second feature is that action research involves researching in the present tense. Action research builds on the past, takes place in the present with a view to shaping the future (Chandler and Torbert 2003). Accordingly, engagement in the cycles of action and reflection perform both a practical and philosophical function in its attentiveness and reflexivity as to what is going on at any given moment and how that attentiveness leads to decisions and choices and yields purposeful action. Accordingly, action researchers need to show how they engaged in cycles of action and reflection in collaboration with others, how they accessed multiple data sources to provide contradictory and confirming interpretations, what choices were made along the way and how they were made, provide evidence of how they challenged and tested their assumptions and interpretations continuously throughout the project and how their interpretations and outcomes were challenged, supported or disconfirmed from existing literature.

Quality in Action Research

As with all approaches to rigorous inquiry, the action research paradigm requires its own quality criteria, taking quality to mean a grade of excellence. The argument is that action research should *not* be judged by the criteria of positivist science, but rather within the criteria of its own terms. Eden and Huxham (2006) provide an extensive list of the 15 characteristics of good action research. The foundational characteristics reflect the intentionality of the researcher to change an organization, that the project has some implications beyond those involved directly in it and that the project has an explicit aim to elaborate or develop theory as well as be useful to the organization. Theory must inform the design and development of the actions. Eden and Huxham place great emphasis on the enactment of the action research cycles, in which systematic method and orderliness is required in reflecting on the outcomes of each cycle and the design of the subsequent cycles. Accordingly, rigor in action research typically refers to how data are generated, gathered, explored and evaluated, how events are questioned and interpreted through multiple action research cycles (Coghlan and Brannick 2010).

Addressing issues of quality explicitly is not something that action research has demonstrated much proficiency. Frequently, published accounts of consulting projects have claimed to be action research merely because they were collaborative and followed cycles of action and reflection. As Shani and Bushe (1987) point out, these accounts have undoubtedly been useful for practitioners but they have often failed to address the intricacies of generating valid knowledge. What has been lacking has been a rigorous reflection on the choices that are made, in relation to, for example: contextual analysis, design, purposes, degrees of collaboration, planning, implementation, review and so on (Coghlan and Shani 2005).

In addressing some of these issues Reason (2006) argues that action research is characteristically full of choices. As action research is conducted in the present tense, attentiveness to these choices and their consequences, and being transparent about them are significant for considering the quality of action research. Reason argues that action researchers need to be aware of the choices they face and make them clear and transparent to themselves and to those with whom they are engaging in inquiry and to those to whom they present their research in writing or presentations. The explicit attention to these questions and to the issues of being rigorous, relevance and reflective, and to the quality of the collaboration take action research beyond the mere narration of events, described as ‘anecdotalism’, to rigorous and critical questioning of experience leading to actionable knowledge for both scholarly and practitioner communities.

Pasmore et al. (2008) postulate that action research and collaborative research needs to be *rigorous*, *reflective* and *relevant*. Under *rigorous*, they group: data-driven, multiple methodologies, reliability across settings, co-evaluation, causality, underlying mechanisms and publishability. Under *reflection* they group: historical impact, referential, co-interpretation, community of practice, collection and repeated application. Under *relevant* they group: practical, codetermined, re-applicable, teachable, face-valid, interesting, true significance and specific. In enacting action research in OD in the present tense and aiming to produce practical knowing that is rigorous, reflective and relevant, a general empirical method is central (Coghlan 2010). This method is grounded in: being attentive to data of sense and of consciousness (experience), exploring intelligently to envisage possible explanations of that data (understanding), judging soundly, preferring as probable or certain the explanations that provide the best account for the data (judgment) and being responsible for decisions and actions. When OD researchers and practitioners attend to

organizational experiences, converse together to understand, and construct shared meanings (however provisional) from which appropriate OD research interventions may be selected and implemented, they are enacting the general empirical method. In this manner they are embodying rigor in a science of action and addressing explicitly the pitfalls of working from untested inferences and attributions (Argyris 2004; Coghlan 2010).

In keeping with Shani and Pasmore's definition and research, we propose that quality in action research in the context of OD may be framed in terms of the key areas that they identify: purpose and rationale for action and inquiry, context, methodology and method of inquiry, design, narrative and outcomes, reflection on the narrative in the light of the experience and the theory; extrapolation to a broader context and articulation of practical knowing are presented in their terms of their essence and are juxtaposed in terms of being rigorous, reflective and relevant (Table 1).

Purpose and Rationale of the Research

The starting point for action research is a question that puzzles or the strategic or operational intervention that needs to be taken and from which the imperative for action and research follow (Schein 1997). When action researchers are framing the purpose and rationale of an action research piece of work, they are, in effect, presenting the case, stating why the action chosen was worth doing for the organization, why it is worth studying and what it is that it seeks to contribute to the world of theory and of practice. It is critical issue for action researchers, at the outset of an action research paper, to make both a practical and an academic case for what they are doing and to declare their intentionality to both enable change and to generate actionable knowledge. This is not just an argument for credibility but a formal effort to locate their work in both a practical and an academic context. Accordingly, Table 1 poses questions as to how being rigorous, reflective and relevant are present in the presentation of the purpose and rationale of the action research project.

Context

Context here refers to the business, social and academic context of the research. There are three context areas: the broad general business context at global and national level; the local organizational/discipline context, that is what is going on in the selected organization; and then the specific topic area. In action research framing the business and social context is very important. Therefore, action researchers need to describe the business context in which the organization operates, and the organization with which they are working. This would include some details of competitive environment, an introduction to the organization, what it does, some historical background about the organization, its evolution and history with OD efforts if any, what its concerns are and what the issues in which it is are engaging mean and what is intended and hoped for out of the action research project. This description contains not only a presentation of the facts of the organization in its business and competitive setting but also contains a review of some of the relevant literature on the setting. Academic context is also important. Not only are action researchers framing the business context of their project, they also review and critique the research that has been done in that context and locate their action research in that tradition and so lay the ground for their hoped-for contribution that extends beyond the immediacy of the particular organizational setting and the people involved in the project. Table 1 poses questions as to

Table 1 Elements of quality in action research in organization development

	The essence	Rigor	Reflective	Relevant
Purpose and rationale for action and inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case for why action and research are necessary or desirable? • What contribution is intended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it provide a clear rationale for inquiry and action? • To what extent the focus addresses a gap in the scientific literature? • Does it display the data to justify the purpose and rationale for the study? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it linked to past research and scientific literature? • Is it linked to contemporary business and organizational issues? 	Does it describe why action is necessary or desirable? (To achieve what for whom)
Context	Understanding the business, organizational and academic context	Is the contextual data captured in a scientific, systematic and holistic way?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does it build on past and present scientific research that is central to the focus of the study? • Does it build on past and present organizational experience that is central to the issue studied? 	To what extent relevant analytical frameworks applied to understand the context?
Methodology and method of inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of the action researcher • Ethical issues • Contracting • Establish learning mechanisms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is the process of contracting, selection of methods of action and inquiry collaborative? • To what extent are the methods and inquiry process described with sufficient details? • To what extent are alternative LMs tapestries explored? • Are appropriate modes of AR selected and justified? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are the action and research cycles described? • To what extent is the LMs tapestry involved in the development of the methodology and inquiry method? 	To what extent are the methods of action and inquiry driven by the organization's needs and scholarly criteria?
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection and generation • Cycles of action research • Building relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is the project designed and implemented to ensure rigor? • To what extent the data is collaboratively and rigorously generated, collected and explored? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent is the project designed and implemented collaboratively? • To what extent attention is paid to the development of the quality of the relationship? 	To what extent is the research design directed to meet the organization's needs, as well as those of academic rigor?
Narrative and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the story and outcomes (intended and unintended) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well is the story told, with an appropriate level of detail? • To what extent are facts and values distinguished? 	To what extent does the story demonstrate collaborative inquiry and action in the present tense?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does it capture what happened? • What were the outcomes, both intended and unintended?

Table 1 continued

	The essence	Rigor	Reflective	Relevant
Reflection on the story and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze story and reflection Make judgments on the process and outcomes 	To what extent do the narrative and description of outcomes meet the standards/criteria of research?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent is the story reflected on collaboratively? To what extent is shared meaning created? To what extent did dialogue about meaning and possible actions among different organisational groups/units/communities of practice take place? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent are story and outcomes' meaning focused on the organization's needs? To what extent are story and outcomes' meaning focused on addressing the scientific needs?
Discussion Extrapolation to a broader context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Link story to theory (existing and emerging theory) Discuss the story and outcomes 	To what extent does the entire account (purpose/rationale, methodology and methods, design, narrative and outcomes, reflection, the quality of the action research process, the quality of relationships) contribute to practical knowing?	To what extent does the entire account (purpose/rationale, methodology and methods, design, narrative and outcomes, reflection) contribute to sustainable outcomes for the organization and practical knowing for scholars?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent does the AR approach demonstrate returns that make the process and effort worthwhile?
Articulation of practical knowing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss the action research process, quality of relationships, and sustainability of the outcomes Articulate contribution to both theory and practice 			

how being rigorous, reflective and relevant are present in the presentation of the context of the project.

Methodology and Methods of Action and Inquiry

This is a section on methodology in which the action research approach, methodology and methods of inquiry are described. This is a matter of providing some basic information on action research and an introduction to any particular modality that will be used. For example, if the project is built on an appreciative inquiry modality, then a definition, some history and the main philosophical tenets of appreciative inquiry would be provided and justified for this context. Alternatively the action research may be framed as collaborative management research and so this modality's tenets and methods would be introduced. Both OD and action research have changed over the past 30 years (Coghlan 2012). A paper on action research in OD would need to position itself with regard to the approach it takes. For example, a particular project may be focused on the conversations in the organization as so positions itself in terms of 'dialogic' OD (Bushe and Marshak 2009). In contrast, a project may follow a more traditional process of expert diagnosis, planning, implementation and evaluation. Table 1 poses questions as to how the philosophical grounding of methodology and methods of inquiry build in structures of rigor, reflection and relevance.

Design

There needs to be a general plan of how cognitive, structural and procedural learning mechanisms are designed both to address the practical issue and to generate knowledge and how ethical issues were considered (Shani and Docherty 2003; Coghlan and Shani 2005). For example, the design might be built around project teams that would meet to address the issues confronting the organization and which might work in an action learning mode to articulate their learning in-action. As the project proceeds in the present tense, ethical issues of obtaining consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality and balancing conflicting and different interests are grounded in the cycles of planning, taking action and reflection (Walker and Haslett 2002). Design needs to be informed by theory as well as by the exigencies of the situation.

Selecting an appropriate research intervention involves two processes. First, there is the collaborative process between OD researchers and organizational practitioners in the mode of 'dialogic OD' and action research and collaborative management research. Second, there is the method they use in assessing the experiences that lead to OD intervention and theory generation. These describe how the design was collectively constructed to meet the requirements of rigor, reflection and relevance.

The action researchers also need to locate themselves in the project, i.e. as external or internal OD consultants, senior or line managers. Here they introduce themselves in terms of their role regarding the project and position themselves and the challenges they face. Action researchers who acted as OD consultants need to explain how the research role was negotiated, especially if the initial contract was more oriented toward helping than toward research (Schein 1995).

Narrative and Outcomes

The heart of any action research paper is the narrative or story of what took place. Here the cycles of action and reflection reflect a systematic method and order in constructing,

planning action, taking action and reviewing outcomes and process and generating understanding. A critical issue in presenting the narrative is to distinguish the events which took place, about which there is no dispute, and the meanings attributed to these events. This form of presentation gives the evidence in a factual and neutral manner. The action researchers' view of these events and their theorizing as to what these events are considered to mean should not be mixed in with the telling of the story. By separating the narrative from its interpretation, and by clearly stating which is story and which is interpretation, action researchers are demonstrating how they are applying methodological rigor to their approach. Combining narrative and interpretation leaves them open to the charge of biased story-telling and makes it difficult for readers and editors to evaluate their work. The questions in Table 1 challenge the narrative of the events of the project in terms of being rigorous, reflective and relevant.

Reflection on the Narrative and Outcomes

Here action researchers present their understanding of the events of the narrative and their theorizing as to what these events and outcomes are considered to mean and what their judgments are about them. The outcomes, both intended and unintended, desired and undesired, are judged in terms of the intention of the project to address the organization's needs and of the collaborative processes as rigorous, reflective and relevant in coming to judgment about the project's success or otherwise.

The Discussion/Extrapolation to a Broader Context and Articulation of Practical Knowing

A key issue that requires attention is that the action research study must have implications beyond the remit of the immediate project. As commented earlier, one of the most common criticisms of published action research is that it lacks theory. In other words, action research accounts tell a story but do not address issues of emergent theory and so contribute to practical knowing. Action research projects are situation specific and do not always aim to create universal knowledge. At the same time, extrapolation from a local situation to more general situations is of utmost importance. Action researchers are not claiming that every organization will behave as the one studied. But they can focus on some significant factors, consideration of which is useful for other organizations, perhaps like organizations or organizations undergoing similar types of change processes or offer a contribution to methodology.

In terms of the Shani and Pasmore's (1985) framework, action researchers need to reflect on purpose and rationale for action and inquiry, context, methodology, design and method of inquiry, narrative and outcomes, and so on. For example, on context, the discussion may reflect on the impact it had on the project, especially if it changed or evolved in some way. The discussion would reflect on the quality of relationship between the researchers and organizational members and how the relationships need to be managed through trust, collaboration, dialogue concerns for one another's interest, equality of influence, common language and so on. It would also reflect on the quality of the action research process itself—how the collaborative processes of shared inquiry and action worked. Finally the discussion would reflect on the outcomes of the project—what might be sustainable (human, social, economic, ecological) and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of new knowledge from the inquiry.

The discussion on the action research process itself is central. OD researchers work to help the organizational members to understand what is going on and to take action based on that understanding (Coghlan 2009). Through their interventions, both those to help take action and those to help generate knowledge, OD researchers employ the general empirical method in engaging with organizational members, whether as clients or fellow organizational colleagues. They do this to draw out their clients' or colleagues' experience, their insights, their judgments and their actions in the settings where things change as a consequence of intervention, and where perceptions and meanings shift as people interact and enact strategies and actions for change. The focus is firmly on acts of knowing and doing in the present tense as the project unfolds. Hence, the discussion needs to show the integrity between the purpose of the research and action, how the context is assessed, the quality of the relationships whereby how the participants have engaged in cycles of action and reflection on a real-life issue, and how the outcomes are workable and that they generate actionable knowledge.

Discussion

Returning to Shani and Pasmore's (1985) definition of action research at the outset of this paper, quality action research may be judged in terms of the four factors from that definition. These factors are: how the context is assessed and captured; the quality of collaborative relationships between researchers and members of the system; the quality of the action research process itself as cycles of action and reflection are enacted and simultaneously capturing the issues that emerge while carrying out the research in the present tense, and; that the dual outcomes reflect some level of sustainability (human, social, economic and ecological) and the development of self-help and competencies out of the action and the creation of practical knowing from the inquiry. While an action research intervention may not be replicable as the exigencies of a particular situation may not always be repeated, the learning needs to be transferable and the process may be transportable to other situations. This framework is compatible with other frameworks such as that of Stebbins and Snow (1982) and Eden and Huxham (2006). Pasmore and Friedlander's (1982) landmark account of building employee involvement in problem solving around personal injuries demonstrates the process of framing the context, describing the processes of interaction, how data was gathered and analysed and what the outcomes were. While this account predates Shani and Pasmore's (1985) consolidation of the processes of action research into the framework introduced in this article, the framework can be gleaned as tacitly underpinning quality action research work. In a parallel vein, the framework is explicitly used in by Cirella et al. (2012) in collaborative management research context. It also provides a structure for dealing with the challenges of writing about action research and of integrating the story into a rigorous reflection (Hildrum and Strand 2007).

As Coghlan and Shani (2013) explore, this involves discussing how these four factors are engaged rigorously, reflectively and relevantly. They discuss, for example that if rigor is viewed as upholding the standards of scientific proof in assessing the impact of a specific organizational issue on performance, then a discussion of how a dialogical process that is embedded in scientifically generated data, data analysis and data interpretation may be rigorous. Also, if reflection is viewed as the process of jointly and collectively creating new insights and theories by referring to the related work of others, the discussion needs to discuss how the contextual factors might impact on the quality of reflection as well as about the design choices of the dialogical process that can facilitate creating the most appropriate context for that reflection.

Leading an action research project in the present tense requires simultaneous attention throughout the project to all four factors. For example, capturing a change in the action research project course due to an unexpected change in the company strategy due to a new innovation or a strategic opportunity and how it is impacting the emphasis and/or level of engagement in the inquiry process and/or its direction generates critical insights of relevance to both the system and scientific community. Such a change is likely to trigger a set of reflection and dialogue about different research design choices midstream in the project. The quality of the effort is likely to be influenced by the systematic capturing of events and dynamics that occurred during the duration of the project, the content and process of dialogues that were followed, the design and methodological implications that they triggered and the outcomes that they generated.

Finally, if relevance is understood as addressing the concerns of both the practitioner and academic communities then the processes of inquiry and action and the outcomes need to address both communities. Yet, as is discussed in this paper, systematic process for addressing in a continuous fashion the issues of relevance by both communities requires the design of arenas and/or mechanisms for ongoing dialogue. The questions that were articulated in Table 1 can serve as a launching pad for such dialogue.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to explore the question of what constitutes quality action research within OD. Given the broad range of approaches that operates in a wide variety of settings and with great diversity, this is a difficult question. Through working from a definition and a framing of action research within an OD context using the broad criteria of rigor, relevance and reflective specific assessment dimensions were advanced. Implemented systematically they provide a profile that would suggest the degree to which an OD action research meets the criteria of being labeled an action research-based study. While not everyone undertaking action research in OD may use the same definition, we are confident that the issues and criteria in this paper have a relevance to other definitions. While many action researchers may take a different approach, we suggest that irrespective of the definition adopted (and the quality criteria that might be gleaned from that), the above quality criteria remain pertinent.

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