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Engagement in Management Research

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Abstract

This paper attends to the use of collaborative research methods and why these form only a small proportion of reported research in management in general and in information systems research in particular.
Use is made of the notion of engaged research where there is active involvement in the real-world setting and responsibility is accepted by the researcher for bringing about direct changes to the real-world situation. This, together with a distinction between the mode, stance and method of research permits a clearer understanding of the implications for the the researcher and highlights the need to attend to the role of the researcher and give increased attention to political and ethical issues when conducting information systems research. Recognition of these is important in discussing research, in planning and reporting research and in mentoring the work of students and new researchers.

Keywords

Research Methods, Action Research, Information Systems Research, Intervention Studies

Introduction

The relatively new discipline of information systems (IS) has already given much attention to methodologies and methods, both in respect to improved practice (how to better develop information systems) and improved theory (how to best conduct academic research in this field). This paper focuses on the contribution that may be made to both through employing those methodologies and methods in collaborative work with organisations and some of the obstacles to doing so.

Recent years have seen a growing interest in methodological pluralism in information systems research (e.g. Hirschheim & Klein, 1989; Galliers, 1991; Landry and Banville, 1992; Walsham, 1993; Mingers, 2001; Baskerville and Myers, 2002). This , together with debates over rigour versus relevance in IS research (Keen, 1991; Turner *et al*, 1991; Zmud, 1996; Benbasat and Zmud, 1999; Davenport and Markus, 1999) has give greater legitimacy to work done in non-positivist traditions and in collaboration with practitioners in organisational settings. We have moved, one might believe, away from a total reliance on lab experiments and quantitative analysis of

surveys towards acceptance of interpretative investigations of how to develop, employ and understand the consequences of information and communication technologies. Research methods, such as action research, that, closely link research to the real-world concerns of practice have been seen as particularly desirable for IS research (Mansell, 1991; Baskerville and Wood-Harper,1998; Avison *et al,* 1999). In addition to defending the research against the charges of non-relevance, action research and collaborative research in general have clear practical benefits. Governments and research funding bodies favour collaboration as it demonstrates the relevance of the research to the wider community to which they are responsible. The application of theory in one or more real-world situations also provides a strong warrant for the underlying theoretical arguments, illustrating their use and demonstrating their practical efficacy. Further, in technical domains such as IS organisational practice may be ahead of theory (Checkland & Holwell, 1998) and collaboration may provide the only way for academic researchers to participate in new technology-driven or high cost initiatives.

However, analyses of papers published in the major IS journals reveal that such research forms only a very small proportion of IS research. For example, different studies show positivist research to dominate the IS journals and action research to account for only about 2% of reported research. (Orlikowski and Baroudi, 1991; Mingers, 2003; Chen and Hirschheim, 2004).

This discrepancy is not perverse but entirely understandable because of the difficulties that are common to collaborative forms of research. In a time of tenure concerns and research assessment exercises practical problems can make the non-choice of collaborative research methods a very rational and calculated choice.

These include that establishing and maintaining the researcher-organisation relationship is notoriously difficult. Organisations will, especially in times of economic downturn, require there to be some clearly identifiable benefit to themselves. The value of better understanding their own situation or behaviour through an outside perspective might be appreciated but this is, by itself, rarely sufficient. It is more common for an answer to some specific organisational concern or the achievement of some pre-defined objective to be required as 'quid pro quo' for granting access to the researcher and the use of always-scarce organisational resources. This means that the researcher must be seen as providing something, be it expertise or knowledge that is valuable and otherwise not readily obtainable by the organisation. In rapidly changing fields such as information systems the academic researcher, especially those without recent industry experience, may not be seen to have anything to offer.

The duration of the research can too be a problem. The length of time required for useful learning to arise from the collaboration may be longer than a researcher, eager to achieve publications, might wish. Accompanying the long timescale is the continuing risk that changes and events within the organisation will lead to the access (and with it the research) being terminated prematurely. Months or years of effort may be wasted.

Even if such dangers are avoided then little credit may be given for the researchers perseverance, for difficulties must be faced in respect to the way in which the research is regarded by, and reported to, the wider academic community. Bryman (1989) recognises this in in his discussion of action research:

At the heart of such distrust lie suspicions that academic rigour may be sacrificed for organisational relevance and context dependent learning favoured over generalisable knowledge. Both charges have been argued against repeatedly (e.g. Eden & Huxham, 1996) and good research designs make them no more valid than in other forms of non-scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, the worry that they shall need to be addressed yet again can be daunting to the novice researcher.

Given such difficulties it may seem surprising that anyone should take the route of collaborative research but some do. A most notable example has been the long term programme of action research conducted at Lancaster University in the 1970s and 1980s that led to numerous papers and books on the Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1999). Our own involvement in this and experience of conducting collaborative research projects over twenty years has led to the realisation that the type of problems met are not consistently experienced across all forms of collaborative research. Some piece of work which the research is regarded by, and reported to, the wider academic community. Bryman (1989) recognises this in in his discussion of action research:

> In action research, the investigator virtually becomes part of the arena being studied with the purpose of solving organizational problems. This orientation appears to involve a surrendering of detachment, and it is not surprising that many practitioners display concern about the ethical bases of their enterprise. … … it has never achieved widespread acceptance; for many researchers it is too close to a consultancy role, while the taint of manipulation and an excessive managerialism has done little to endear it to others. P. 187.

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point towards a similar distinction in discussion of participant observations. They identify a range of 'different data-gathering methods', suggesting that these

> "..vary in the extent to which they offer opportunities for interaction between the researcher and the research phenomena; from relatively 'distant' methods, in which there is no direct contact between the researcher and the social actors in the research context, to those that involve intensive, and often extended, engagement between researchers and their 'subjects'." P.113

The mode of research is not determined by the research method. Case study research, for example, can require frequent site visits, observations and interviews but is sometimes also carried out without any of these. Our survey of papers in the major IS journals published in the year 2002 reveals where the method is described as being 'case study' then 14% of those studies were done purely through publicly available sources with no direct contact with the organisation studied. Whilst we find this regrettable it clearly indicates that commitment to Case Study research does not in itself commit the researcher to a high level of contact and interaction.

Turning to the second determinant of engagement, this is the level of commitment and responsibiity for change accepted by the researcher or research team. This is the *stance* of the research. Traditional research strategies, as borrowed fron the natural sciences, aim for the researcher as a detached and uninvolved observer of events. But in methods such as action research the researcher learns from active participation in the situation and being embroiled in everyday events. Bringing about change is then an equally valued outcome of the research (Argyris et al 1985; Wood-Harper 1985; Stringer, 1996; Eden & Huxham 1996; Baskerville 1999; Reason & Bradbury 2001) and the on-detachment of the researcher is a valed contribution to bringing about change. As already indicated above, auch a digression from the traditional view of what an academic researcher is, and what an academnic researcher does presents problems in how the researcher is perceived. The stance of the research is though not a one-or-the-other choice between no involvement and full involvement. It is rather a continuum within which the researcher may choose a given level of involvement and be motivated more or less strongly towards bringing about certain outcomes. The willingness of a researcher to actively intervene and interfere in the researched situation will involve that researcher in actions that are very different from those required by more detached forms of research and cause them to face very different issues.And, once again, the choice of research method need not necessarily imply a particular stance; a simulation might be carried out purely to explicate some gathered research data or to suggest better ways of, say, managing pateints needs in a hospital in future.

Together then the method, the mode and the stance of any piece or research, together with the context in which it is carried out will present the researcher with difficulties unique to their situation. For some of these difficulties guidance may be found in the literature of research and research methods (Bryman, 1989; Easterby-Smith *et al*, 1991; Gill & Johnson 2002; Gray, 2004) The majority of these works however come from a tradition of detached, non-involved research where organisations are a source of data and subject of study, and there is little discussion of the political and practical nature of establishing and managing the research.

The mode and stance together allow us to differentiate betwixt four basic forms of research intervention. The first is where researchers carry out research independently

and with no involvement of real-world organisations or stakeholders (collaboration does not occur or is low) and the sought outcome is solely the satisfaction of intellectual ends. The results of the research will be published and might even affect some other individuals' future actions. But whether they do so or not is of no concern to the researcher and they feel no responsibility for whether anything changes as a result. Engagement is here low.

In the second area the research is rooted in the real world and some collaboration takes place. This is limited though, perhaps to the extent that external parties allow the researcher access to observe and investigate. The researcher's intent is to gather data in order to expand understanding or test theory. They do not propose to change the situation, even though they may recognise that their presence in the situation may indeed cause it to be other than it would otherwise have been. Social science influenced management research tends to occupy this area, with case study descriptions or survey investigations of events being typically used and the researcher still maintaining personal distance from real-world events.

Academic-organisational collaborations in more practically oriented management disciplines such as Operational Research tend to be located in a third area. Here the researchers provide expertise and knowledge to the organisation's benefit, receiving in return data and the opportunities for real world testing of theory. The researcher is aware that changes may result (the organisation may actually use their results) but the collaboration remains still restricted to perhaps data provision and shared interpretations of the results of analysis and modelling. Recommendations may be made but the researcher will not themselves be involved in implementing any that are accepted.

Finally we have the very engaged form research that is most commonly labelled as 'action research'. Here the researchers are intrinsically involved in the situation and agents of change. They will need to concern themselves with managing the intervention and be called upon to attend to the politics of interventions (Dunning-Lewis 1998; Dunning-Lewis & Townson 1998). Attention will need to be given to such things as understanding who has power, how it is used, what hidden agendas may exist and the ways in which the research intervention and the researcher may be used. And there wiil be a need to engineer the intervention, to make it happen and to keep it alive. These are the least discussed of all aspects of research and the most daunting for new researchers.

Implications

Inducting new researchers

We have found that the distinction between the method mode and stance to be a useful device when reviewing and planning research with students or new members of academic staff, as well as a useful discipline for ourselves when embarking on a new piece of research. Challenging oneself or others to locate clearly where they foresee themselves working in terms of the research methods to b used, the degree of contact and interaction they anticipoate and the overall level of engagement with the organisation leads to surprising results. Frequently one finds that these things have not

been given much thought and that the individual is harbouring unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved or what may be done.

This illustrates forcibly that hhighly engaged collaborative research requires skills and sensitivities that are not required in other forms of research and not always provided in research training. Research training programmes frequently privilege discussion of the philosophies of research over their application in practice and new researchers can be surprised by, and ill-prepared for, the problems they will encounter in turbulent organisational settings. This problem is compounded by the conventions of reporting academic research, for these require that all the nitty-gritty contextual detail be omitted from the report; what might call the case-studies of doing the research are therefore not available and cannot be a source of learning and guidance.

Ethics

It may not be coincidental that information systems research has given little attention to both collaborative research methods and ethical issues. The method-mode-stance distinction helps to make clear that employing particular methods may in some contexts lead to issues that would not arise elsewhere. For example, calls for IS research that favours empowerment suggest a strongly engaged researcher may actively support or advance some outcomes and be antipathetic and seek to confound the achievement of others. This provides an ever-present danger of tensions between responsibilities to the situation and responsibilities to the research.
Accentuated too will be problems of what constitutes informed consent in more engaged collaborative research. Access is usually gained when the collaboration is arranged with the managers rather than the workers of the organisation. If a research method such as participant observation is used then the real identity of the researcher and their motives for being in the organisation may be hidden from their co-workers. This means that ethical issues arise over using data gained under what some might call false pretences

The researcher as individual

Recognising the special nature of highly engaged research forces a re-consideration of the role of the researcher. The researcher is traditionally assumed to be a rational, politically neutral party with allegiance to the pursuit of knowledge and disinterested in the course of events. That is what is implied by the norms of reporting research, where the researcher is present only in their passive-voice description of their work. In information systems research, as in other fields of management research, we are reluctant to admit that we are not 'just there' doing the research but that there is a history to our involvement and that we are human beings driven by our needs and ambitions to be participants in the research activity and do it in particular ways. The desire for knowledge may be the most important reason we are there but we seem strangely reluctant to acknowledge other considerations such as; the need to publish in order to improve their professional status or keep their jobs: that the researcher or their institution may not be indifferent to whether financial payments arising from the collaboration will continue: that there may be a desire to empower some groups or that the researcher is not indifferent to whether an undesirable situation or the suffering of

individuals to continue. The physical scientist, working in the closed conditions of a laboratory, may be able to regard such personal motivations as outwith the concerns of their research; but the management scientist cannot.

As we attempt to better understand the nature of engaged collaborative research it becomes clear that there are special considerations in terms of individual, social and political influences on the research, the setting in which the research takes place, the management of the research by the researcher and the way that the research can be validly reported. Our understanding of these and how they may be met is as yet still in its infancy and there will be scope for contributions for many years to come.

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