

Chapter XXXIX

Appreciative Inquiry: Research for Action

Jan Reed

Northumbria University, UK

Agneta Nilsson

IT University of Göteborg, Sweden

Lena Holmberg

Apprino, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the ways in which appreciative inquiry research has developed outlining its links to action research. Both share an emphasis on research for change, developing knowledge through an exploration of current practice, and an application of findings in informing strategies for the future. Where appreciative inquiry is distinct, however, is in the way that it focuses on positive aspects of practice rather than problems, thus facilitating participation in projects. This chapter gives some more details of the appreciative inquiry process and then an overview of related healthcare and IT research is presented. Following this some examples of the use of appreciative inquiry in IT research are given, and the chapter points to ways in which the use of appreciative inquiry can contribute to IT development.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AND IT: AN OVERVIEW

In research traditions there is a long-standing emphasis on developing knowledge, but this has tended to be a focus on finding out about the relationships between variables, the way in which

they exist and the processes by which they exist. In this tradition researchers would look at, for example, the occurrence of IT programs, how many there were, what type there were, and perhaps, how often they were used. Studies would develop measures and methods for counting and identifying this incidence, and perhaps for linking

these incidences, so that theories about causality and process could be developed. In some cases measurement might not be the priority, and different descriptions would be developed, a practice often referred to as “qualitative research”.

Nonetheless the overall goal was for researchers to develop research based knowledge, through carrying out research studies competently, and demonstrations of this competence were the basis on which funding for studies would be awarded and presentations and publications would be accepted and reviewed. The expertise of researchers, then, had its own criteria and approved processes of development. This energy did not usually involve changing the world, but describing it.

This separation, between research and development allows people to focus on specific contributions, but over time calls grew to make the integration of the two more pronounced. This came from observations that research might not be applied in practice, or that the experiences of practitioners might not be reflected in research. While there was an important role for the development of knowledge, and correspondingly the disinterested stance of researchers, there was also a growing awareness of the need to bring practice and research together at points in service development.

These calls are reflected in the growth of action research as an approach which brings together research and practice in order to lead to change. As action researchers have argued, this integration means that both are working together in a process of reflection and development to change practice, and to continually reflect on it. As Mary Brydon-Miller, Davydd Greenwood and Patricia Maguire in their editorial to the first issue of the journal “Action Research” wrote, “Action research challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge which holds that in order to be credible, research must remain objective and value-free.” (2003, p. 11). Action Research, then, differs from the traditional models of research where description is paramount and takes this a step further, to

developing knowledge which can inform practice, which is engaged and which explores the experience of innovation and development.

A research approach which has been linked to action research is Appreciative Inquiry, an approach which can lead to action, and it is this which this chapter moves on to explore in more depth.

Action Research and Appreciative Inquiry

The specific nature of Action Research is difficult to summarise, mainly because it seems to have developed in many different fields and disciplines over the years. There are elements of pragmatic philosophy in some discussions (Reason, 2003) and some resonances with Lewin’s psychology of change. Indeed Brydon-Miller, Greenwood and Maguire, in their discussion of the influences on action research identify a range of thinkers who were influential (2003). They quote Lewin’s dictum “there is nothing so practical as a good theory” in their discussion of the link between research and practice.

Reason and Bradbury have defined Action Research as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.” (2001, p. 1). From this brief description it is clear that Action Research has much to offer the development of IT in Healthcare – a process which allows both health and IT practitioners to work together to find concepts and practices which make sense to everyone. It is not atheoretical, in that it leads to models and theories of both IT and healthcare, but the emphasis is on integration of

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