Using Collaborative and Participative Practitioner-based Research To Develop Conceptual Models

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Abstract
Organisational models are important in all aspects of the research process from problem formulation to conclusions, as such this paper reports findings of the key issues in the in the development of conceptual models in the initial stages of the research process. The first part of the paper will examine the key characteristics of conceptual models and will argue the need and role of organisational models in the formulation of practice-based research problems and questions. The second part of the paper presents findings from focus groups that were conducted with practitioner-based researchers over a 12-month period. The evidence from the field of how management professionals develop their thinking when entering the research process from ‘concrete problems’ to ‘conceptualisation’ suggest that a new set of assumptions have to be developed and employed when developing conceptual models and frameworks. The third part of the paper offers a way foreword for those undertaking organisational research by re-formulating the traditional assumptions of the research process as a means by which they can inform collaborative and participative practitioner-based researcher studies. This will enable researchers and organisational members to abstract their ‘concrete problems’ to ‘higher levels’ of conceptualisation when conceiving conceptual models and frameworks when defining their research issues and questions. Finally the notion of the S-P-I-E approach is introduced to help practice-biased researchers frame practical problems in an appropriate ‘theoretical lens’ which can then lend itself to a more embracing and rigorous approach in the development of organisational model creation.

Background and approach
When practitioners undertake organisational practice-based research there is often a tendency to focus upon the outcomes and products of this process at the expense of formulating sound theoretical principles in which to frame both ontological and epistemological assumptions. For management practitioners the need to generate solutions for practical utility and management action is often greater than to locate their study with a clear set of theoretical and best practice principles. Consequently, this can lead to an obfuscation of the true nature of the problem or ‘organisational puzzle’ to be investigated which results in ad hoc problem and question formulation, unclear methodological stances, and poorly executed data collection strategies. This ultimately results in unsound findings that that do not yield ‘safe’ conclusions.

This small-scale study was formulated within a theoretical framework that is based upon the work of Kaplan (1964), Argyris and Schon (1974) and Nadler (1980) who articulate the need and importance of defining the essential criteria of effective models. This view is also advocated by the work of Miles and Huberman (1994) and Maxwell (2005). They give explicit direction for the creation of conceptual model
building as the starting point for organisational research. The paper will then consider the implications for practical model building and will consider the work of Tichy and Hornstein (1980) when adopting a collaborative model building approach and Eisenhardt (1989) when using developing theories from case study research within an organisational context.

This paper presents findings that have been collected from practice-based researchers over a twelve-month period from May 2007 to May 2008 during the delivery of postgraduate research methods modules with 27 MA, MBA and Doctoral students by means of three focus groups. Data was collected using focus group discussions and then subjected to grounded analysis (Easterby-Smith et al, 2001). The data was then themed using qualitative data analysis as a means to explore practice-based researchers encounter in the initial stages of their research journey. The focus of this paper therefore to addresses the following issues:

1. Why is collaboration essential in the development of conceptual models?

2. What levels of collaboration are needed in the development of conceptual models when formulating research problems?

3. What is the process by which practice-based researchers abstract their research problem to formulate a conceptual framework in order to ‘convert’ their abstraction problems into ‘concrete problems of organisational reality’ to conduct practice-based research?

**Building conceptual models: Some considerations**

A conceptual framework is used in research to outline possible courses of action or to present a preferred approach to investigating a set of issues or problems. The framework is built from concepts linked to behaviors, functions, relationships, and objects that might or might not exist within an organisational environment. Conceptual frameworks are a type of intermediate theory that have the potential to connect to all aspects of inquiry e.g. problem definition, purpose, literature review, methodology, data collection and analysis and act like maps that give coherence to empirical inquiry (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). Because conceptual frameworks are potentially so close to empirical inquiry, they take different forms depending upon the research question or problem. Shields and Tajalli (2006) have identified several types of conceptual frameworks such as working hypotheses, descriptive categories, practical ideal type, models of operations research and formal hypotheses for the field of public administration. The frameworks are linked to particular research purposes which include exploration, description, gauging, decision making and explanation/prediction type studies. When the purpose of the research and conceptual frameworks are aligned other aspects of the research process such as the choice of methodology/ies e.g. surveys, interviews, analysis of existing data, direct observation, focus groups and so forth and type of statistical techniques and qualitative data analysis is made explicit.

As such undertaking organisational research should be a collaborative and participative endeavour if the researcher and the institution are to gain from the experience because if practitioner-based research is to be effective then the outcomes of such studies must be of benefit to both professional practice and institutional policymaking. Therefore, the researcher must take into account the practical nature,
outcomes and impact that their study might have upon professional practice and policymaking and the creating of conceptual frameworks are central to collaborative and participative research studies and should be derived from various sources within and from an organisation. Conceptual frameworks can be descriptive, diagrammatical or a combination of these approaches and should be formulated by contributions from various sources with an organisation. They may take on several iterations before an accepted model of the issues has been reached (see Miles and Huberman, 1994 who provide a detailed explanation of developing of conceptual frameworks). Take for example a study of organisational effectiveness. If this centres solely upon explaining generalisations rather than addressing specific solutions to specific issues then their implementation into practice might prove difficult as it might alienate individuals who have not participated in the study and will have no relevance to them for changing and improving their professional practice.

However, ‘traditional’ assumptions are still held by researchers and participants concerning the nature of undertaking collaborative and participative practitioner-based research and the development of conceptual frameworks can be seriously flawed if individuals are alienated from the modelling process of ‘organisational life’ (Armitage, 2008). Nadler (1980) and Lawler, et al (1980) have identified these assumptions as follows:

**Assumption 1:** The researcher has most or all the information and knowledge needed to carry out a well-designed research project.

**Assumption 2:** Any instrument the researcher designs or selects will be accepted by the organisation.

**Assumption 3:** The institution and its stakeholders do not need to know the researcher’s orientation or the purposes of the research.

**Assumption 4:** Researchers do not need to know the institutions orientation or “implicit” organisation theories.

**Assumption 5:** Institutional commitment to participating in research can be obtained in the interest of ‘science’.

**Assumption 6:** Adoption and implementation will follow assessment, diagnosis, and solution identification.

This suggests, the researcher as ‘the expert’ approach assumes that institutional stakeholders will be ready and willing to cooperate with the research agenda set by the researcher. Further those who take part in the study will be only too glad to exchange their thoughts and ideas about how things ‘can done for the better around here’ and will be eager to get involved without any second thoughts. It also assumes that the researcher can remain oblivious to the organisational context into which they intend do their study.

However, this may not be the best way to engage those who are ultimately to benefit from the outcomes of collaborative and participative practitioner-based research. For example, ‘good’ case study research does take into account the context in which a
study takes place where the conclusions are specifically focused on a particular issue or set of issues. Therefore, we must always ask the following questions before we enter the research environment:

- What are the reasons for conducting this study?
- What are the characteristics needed by the organisational researcher?
- What ethical issues have to be overcome?
- How can the traditional assumptions of research be re-formulated to enable collaborative and participative enquiry to be successful?

For those who are contemplating a practitioner-based study there are many advantages of this approach. The major reason is its collaborative approach, which can act as an institutional change agent through its stakeholders, ideally at all levels of the hierarchy thus leading to the empowerment and involvement of participants in a problem solving process and environment. Other reasons for doing collaborative practitioner-based research concern themselves with the attainment of human potential and self-efficacy. This can be achieved for example by action research approaches that create communities of professional practice and knowledge leading to new insights, substantive theory and model building of organisational practice and policies and the formulation of further research questions to be investigated (Armitage, 2008).

**Research design and methodology**

**Rationale**

Powell et al (1996: 499) define a focus group as ‘a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’. There are many definitions of a focus group in the literature, but features like organised discussion (Kitzinger 1994), collective activity (Powell et al 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger 1995) identify the contribution that focus groups make to social research.

Focus groups are a form of group interviewing but it is important to distinguish between the two. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups however rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher. (Morgan, 1997:12). Hence, the key characteristic, which distinguishes focus groups, is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants. Merton and Kendall’s (1946) work the focused interview set the parameters for focus group development for this study. This was in terms of ensuring that participants have a specific experience of or opinion about the topic under investigation; that an explicit interview guide is used; and that the subjective experiences of participants are explored in relation to the predetermined research questions.

Focus groups can be used at the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study (Kreuger 1988); during a study, perhaps to evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities (Race et al 1994); or after a programme has been completed, to assess its impact or to generate further avenues of research. They can be used as a method either
in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for triangulation (Morgan 1988) and validity checking.

Focus groups can help to explore or generate hypotheses (Powell & Single 1996) and develop questions or concepts for questionnaires and interview guides (Hoppe et al 1995; Lankshear 1993). They are however limited in terms of their ability to generalise findings to a whole population, mainly because of the small numbers of people participating and the likelihood that the participants will not be a representative sample. Examples of research in which focus groups have been employed include developing HIV education in Zimbabwe (Munodawafa et al 1995), understanding how media messages are processed (Kitzinger 1994 & 1995), exploring people’s fear of woodlands (Burgess 1996) and distance interviewing of family doctors (White & Thomson 1995).

**Conducting focus groups for this study**

Focus groups were independently conducted over a twelve-month period from May 2007 to May 2008 during the delivery of postgraduate research methods modules. These consisted of three groups with seven MA, 12 MBA and 5 Doctoral students which are within the recommended ‘number range’ participants per group (MacIntosh 1993; Kitzinger’ 1995; Goss and Leinbach, 1996).

Each focus group session lasted approximately from two hours. Data was collected using focus group discussions and then subjected to grounded analysis (Easterby-Smith et al, 2001). The data was then themed using qualitative data analysis as a means to explore practice-based researchers encounter in the initial stages of their research journey.

Kitzinger (1994, 1995) argues that interaction is the crucial feature of focus groups because the interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation. Interaction also enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences. As such each of the focus group participants were asked to consider the three questions concerning the formulation and conceptualisation of research problems and questions prior to the focus group discussion, these being:

1. Why is collaboration essential in the development of conceptual models?

2. What levels of collaboration are needed in the development of conceptual models when formulating research problems?

3. What is the process by which practice-based researchers abstract their research problem to formulate a conceptual framework in order to ‘convert’ their abstraction problems into ‘concrete problems of organisational reality’ to conduct practice-based research?

This approach was adopted to facilitate and elicit information in a way which allows researchers to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it in a
considered and informed manner by way of group discussion and debate (Morgan 1988). As a result, the gap between what people say and what they do can be better understood (Lankshear 1993).

A as such the benefits to participants of focus groups gave each participant the opportunity to be involved in the discussion processes (Race et al 1994), to be valued as experts, and to be given the chance to work collaboratively with researchers (Goss and Leinbach 1996) can be empowering for many participants. If a group works well, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to a particular problem as a unit (Kitzinger 1995), rather than as individuals and this ensured that each participant got a chance speak.

Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of social research (Homan 1991). For example, full information about the purpose and uses of participants’ contributions was given thus maintaining honesty and keeping participants informed about the expectations of the focus group, issues, and not pressurizing participants to speak against their wishes was observed through the discussions and debates. At the outset it was made that each participant’s contributions would be shared with the others in the group as well as with the other focus group outcomes but it was made clear that any responses from respondents and individual focus groups would be kept anonymous.

**Focus Group Findings**

**Why is collaboration essential in the development of conceptual models?**
All the respondents were in general agreement that collaboration is a central requirement when developing and formulating organisational research questions, especially those that are concerned with practitioner-based research problems. The findings revealed the following issues as being central in the development of conceptual model building.

One of the focus group members identified that the complexity of organisational life forced practitioner-based researchers to be ‘live’ to the fact that individuals working in such environments would have multiple views of reality and it was the function of a researcher to determine what the problem was and to engage with organizational members. As one, focus group respondent stated:

‘[The] disagreement and selection of alternative issues and deciding upon the real issues to investigate are vital if we are to get to the nub of the problem. It enables us to assess what data is to be accessed for the study and that we don’t go off on the wrong track’

Another focus group member identified that fact that shared understandings was needed amongst organisational members if practitioner-based research was to be truly collaborative so that:

‘A lack of consistency of interpreting data was gained and that a shared understanding of causality of how changes impact in one part of organisation impact upon other parts of organisation can be understood better’
Another respondent from the focus group discussions identified that problem formation was dependent upon meaning and language which was organisationally specific and was an important feature of a researchers role in order to understand the research problem in terms of the ‘local’ organisational language stating that:

‘In order to label problems language, meaning and interpretation of these was needed in the context of how organisational members conceived them to enable any inconsistencies between the researchers model and those of organisational members to be avoided’

**What levels of collaboration are needed to development of conceptual models?**

Collaboration in the development of conceptual models was not confined merely to those who were deemed to be ‘members of staff’ or to particular sections of the organisation. Responses to this question suggested that it was important that ‘internal audits’ of current practices was, as on respondent stated an essential feature that:

‘Organisational members’ must take part in order to for them to get ‘an overall feel of the problem and to identify those who are to be involved with the solving of the particular organisational problem’.

This led on of the focus groups to identify and was subsequently agreed to be an essential feature of practitioner-based research by the other focus groups that a joint action research effort was needed if organisational ‘buy-in’ was to have permanence beyond the confined of a particular research project. One focus group also mentioned that using an outside researcher to undertake an ‘expert assessment’ assessment of the problems and issues was necessary to obtain an independent view of the current situation. The combined findings of the focus groups fell into three main groupings as follows:

**Determining levels of collaboration**

- The researcher contributes theory and research tools (the expert) whilst the organisational members provide local knowledge
- The reasons for carrying out the model building process
  - Time constraints
  - Joint problem solving
  - Negotiation of issues with organisational members
  - Interaction and collaboration with organisational members

**Outcome of collaboration are:**

- Higher with researcher and collaborative approaches
- Higher member ownership and commitment to use results is higher with collaboration
- Ability for organisational members to adopt and use models is higher with collaborative approaches

**Advantages of collaboration when building models**

- Choosing elements of the model
- Developing model categories
Specifying interrelationships among model categories

What is the process by which practice-based researchers formulate problems?
The findings as to how practice-based researchers formulate problems asked each of the focus groups to provide a process (methodology) for developing conceptual models. Whilst the focus group discussions produced their own approach there was an identifiable five step process that all appeared to adopt either implicitly or implicitly in their feedback.

Step 1: Who should participate in the model building process?
- Management – all levels
- The staff/shop floor
- Management and technical
- A combination of these which is contingent upon circumstances and issues to be investigated

Step 2: The use of focus groups/workshop
Organisational members are responsible for:
- Participating in the focus group
- Working collaboratively with colleagues and the researcher
- Helping monitor the process of the workshop by providing feedback to colleagues and researcher
- Providing feedback on the written presentation of the joint model

The researcher is responsible for:
- Designing the focus group
- Being the facilitator
- Participating in model building activities
- Transferring/introducing theories and concepts to participants
- Providing a written summary of the focus group (presenting the model in some detail)

Step 3: Starting a focus group
- Restatement of goals
- Agenda
- Method of procedure and protocol
- Group discussion
- Collaboration
- Positive event – not an opportunity to ‘blame’ and ‘shame’

Step 4: Conducting the focus group
- Round robin
- Pair work
- Small groups
- ‘Free for all’
- Issues of when and what to record
- Use of a scribe

**Step 5: Post focus group - Researcher has responsibility for:**
- Constructing the joint model
- Data collection and analysis approaches
- Disseminating joint model to organisational members
- Receiving participant feedback – participant validation

**Other focus group findings**
The findings also revealed issues that the researcher needs to think about in their role and relationship they have with the institution and those stakeholders who will take part in the study. For example, is the researcher an internal or external member of the organisation? Are they participants or non-participants in the research process itself? Furthermore, the practitioner-based researcher needs to be good organiser and astute organisational politician when negotiating access to information in order to work with professionals in small knit communities of practice. A researcher when doing a collaborative practitioner-based study requires a number of skills. The first is that of a good listener in order to take in the views at all levels in an organisation to get a feel of ‘how things are around here’.

A sympathetic ear and being supportive is also needed, especially to those who might feel ‘vulnerable’ and wary as to the reasons a study is to be undertaken. Ignoring the feelings of those the researcher is to work with might jeopardise the entire research project if negativity becomes infectious. The second is that of being an effective networker and should be an essential part of the researcher’s toolbox. Doing a successful institutional study often requires the help of others to ‘open doors’ especially when dealing with gatekeepers so the ability to be an effective ‘power broker’, negotiate successfully and diplomatically without causing offence is a an essential part of the researchers ‘skill set’.

Being a good facilitator, able to work collaboratively with stakeholders and showing a supportive attitude towards stakeholders are essential qualities of the collaborative practitioner-based researcher. Finally, institutional stakeholders who take part in the study must not overlook the important characteristics of trustworthiness, honesty and reliability – without these qualities the researcher will almost certainly run into the barriers of non-cooperation and this might result in a complete withdrawal if they feel they are being ‘slighted’ in any way.

The findings also revealed that when conducting collaborative practitioner-based research ethical issues are paramount and the researcher must always ask themselves the following questions before entering the research environment:

- Who is the client?
- What is the power relationship of researcher to participants?
- Can I access to data – issues of confidentiality?
- Where findings should be disseminated?
- When should findings be disseminated?
- Are there dangers of ‘scapegoating’? For example exposing and blaming a teacher for unsatisfactory professional practice.

**Implications for organisational practice**

*New assumptions for collaborative and participative practitioner-based research*

It can now be argued that the initial assumptions of undertaking traditional research studies and the implications for formulating research problems and the development of conceptual models can in the light of the evidence presented now be presented as follows:

**Assumption 1:** The researcher needs the information and knowledge that organisational stakeholders have to design correctly the research. This is vital if the researcher is to engage participants. For example, the formation of a new policy will need to draw upon the experiences of organisational members who work with each other and their clients/customers on a day-to-day basis if the right sets of problems and questions are to be addressed.

**Assumption 2:** The kinds of measurement instruments used and the content of the measurement instruments need to reflect a good knowledge of the local culture and climate of an organization. This requires the researcher to take into account the way participants will react to surveys or observational instruments. For example, it is important that researchers do not intrude into the ‘private life’ of organisational members without first agreeing with them what instruments will be used. It would not be advisable to carry out observations of if it might compromise the privacy and personal space of individuals. Sensitivity in the design and use of instruments is needed if the researcher is to maintain participants trust.

**Assumption 3:** The institution and its stakeholders need to know a considerable amount about the researcher’s orientation to organisations and the reason for doing the particular research study. For example the introduction of a government or local authority policy into the organisational environment might set ‘alarm bells off’ if organisational members thought the findings from the study might be disseminated to external bodies such as local authorities, the public and so on which might compromise their professional standing.

**Assumption 4:** The researcher needs to know the client’s orientation and implicit theories of organisation and refers to the cultural aspects of the organisation. The researcher must have a sound grasp of ‘what is going on around here’ before they commence their study and to treat the teaching staff as a single ‘corporate entity’. Even in a small organisation this might be inadvisable in view of the fact that they are engaged in a wide set of issues in their day-to-day practice. For example, the experiences of an new member of staff will probably be different from an experienced senior managers and it is important that the researcher recognise these differences before making general assumptions about the ‘culture’ of the organisation.

**Assumption 5:** Client commitment to participation in research can best be obtained by involving the institution and its stakeholders in the design of the research and fully
communicating to them the purpose of the research. This is important because collaborative practitioner-based research is intended to empower participants beyond the ‘confines’ of the research study and empowers them to become independent organisational problem solvers in their own right. If organisational members are not engaged in the design of a study then the implementation of its outcomes might not be embraced and owned by those who had a hand in helping to formulate them. For example the introduction of a new policy might include only senior managers in the scoping and design of the study and will therefore ignore those at the ‘coal face’ who have to deal with issues directly on a day to day basis. This could lead to the formulation of the wrong research questions been formulated and the alienation of individuals in the lower hierarchies of the organisation who have to cope with these issues on a ‘one to one’ basis and any outcomes might not address strategies for dealing with ‘flash points’ or in the improvement of the organisation environment.

**Assumption 6:** Implementation and adoption are most likely to follow when research participants have been actively involved in the research process. The involvement of organisational members and strategic policy makers is vital for the long lasting effectiveness of a study. For example, a study that investigates the effectiveness of a new performance system will require that all members of staff need to be involved in the successful implementation of any organisational policies that might emerge from its findings. This is vital in terms of both organisational performance and morale and the empowerment of individuals by involving them for example in disseminating findings (even when the study is in progress) displays timely communication with those who have to translate findings into practice. It is also important that channels of communication to the researcher are available to organisational members who will have to implement and manage any subsequent research findings or policies so that new lines of enquiry might be explored in the next cycle of the study as in the case of action research for example.

**The S-P-I-E approach: A model for organisational practice**

The forgoing evidence suggests the researcher needs to determine who the key players are when addressing an organisational problem. A simple, yet effective approach is S-P-I-E (Strategy – Plan – Information – Evaluate) as it reminds the researcher of who should be involved in the study and at what stages. This is illustrated using examples showing how each stage ‘pulls in’ different stakeholders as a means to encourage a democratic and open approach when conducting a collaborative practitioner-based research study to create a model of organisational life.

The S-P-I-E approach (Armitage, 2008) builds on and combines the work of Tichy and Hornstein (1980) when adopting a collaborative model building approach and Eisenhardt’s (1989) eight-step process when using developing theories from case study research within an organisational context.

**Strategy**

At this stage of the project the researcher will need the support of the organisations senior management team in order formulate a strategic approach to tackle the issues. To enable an informed debate in diagnosing the problem and determining the scope of the study they will involve other key players in the organisation such as heads of department, section heads and team leaders. This shows a commitment and a sense of
ownership of the problems from the ‘top’ and a willingness to include others who can have a key set of inputs in determining the issues to be addressed.

**Plan**
This stage involves the planning, design, and approach of the study. Heads of department and middle management might be given the responsibility in conjunction with the researcher for directing the study ‘on the ground’. These are key players in determining where the issues might best be investigated because they have a good overview of what is happening in the locality if their organisation. Section heads and team leaders might also be involved at this stage, as they are a key link in the identification of problems on a day-to-day basis as they are the ‘eye and ears’ of an organisations culture and learning environment.

**Information**
Section heads and team leaders for example might be best placed to collect data first hand for example if the study is concerned with for example risk assessment within a process management environment then they are probably best placed to collect first had data of experiences of incidents. The researcher needs to work closely with ‘information and data collectors’ to ensure consistency in its collection. For example in the collection and reporting of risk assessment figures in a timely and accurate manner is important in determining where and when key parts of the weak and at risk areas are located in the organisation and are more prone to failure.

**Evaluate**
This stage of the study requires the researcher to bring all the stakeholders to come together and discuss its findings. This is an important stage of the study as accurate feedback is vital for setting a course of action to address the problem in any policy formulation. This will mean that the researcher needs to bring together senior management, section heads and team leaders to evaluate what has been found and to formulate an organisations policy based upon the collective input of all stakeholders in the study.

**Conclusions**
Undertaking collaborative and participative practitioner-based research in organisational contexts can be both rewarding and revealing (Armitage, 2008). It comes in many guises for example action research approaches that are familiar and popular in organisational settings, as are ethnographies, and socially constructed experiments that attempt to explore the dynamics of organisational settings. However no matter the approach taken, organisational research relies upon the voluntarily participation of participants. For example social experiments which might investigate for example classroom behaviour or action research where the participants may be involved in the design of the study or in helping to find solutions to the problem being investigated. Participants may also be involved in implementing the outcomes of the research and in their management, especially if this involves a change process or drawing up of an organisational strategic policy document.
If it is to have effective outcomes and solutions for professional, practice collaborative practitioner-based research should engage a variety of stakeholders ranging from organisational members, customers, local authorities and the local/global community. This can be an emancipatory experience for those stakeholders involved in the study and provides an ethos emphasising autonomy and empowerment in the solution of real life problems. This would suggest that a researcher acting in isolation from their research environment cannot undertake collaborative practitioner-based research. If valid outcomes are required to support change, for example in the classroom or to inform institutional policy making initiatives within local authorities then the researcher needs to be sensitive to those who take part in the research study.

However whilst there are advantages of undertaking collaborative and participative practitioner-based research, it does need to guard against certain traditional attitudes concerning the research process. Thus, as this small-scale study has suggested a new set of assumptions are required when undertaking collaborative and participative practitioner-based research. The findings suggest that the context of the research study must be taken into account before entering the organisational environment and that practice-based researcher’s need to recognise the needs of the institution as well as those of stakeholders that take part in the study. This means they need to strike a balance between being ‘directive’ rather than always having to assume the ‘expert’ leadership role – in other words they have to adopt a ‘facilitative attitude’ during the research process.

The reformulation of the initial assumptions of doing ‘traditional’ research as outlined at the commencement of this paper have now been re-formulated in the light of the evidence collected from the empirical evidence that emerged from the study. This has lead to the formulation of the S-P-I-E approach which helps inform and remind practice-based researchers (and researchers in general) of the need to include organisational members in the design, data collection and dissemination phases of the research process if organisational practices and polices are to have long term ‘buy-in’ once the research has been completed.

Collaborative and participative practitioner-based research emphasises organisational and professional contexts and not its method of procedure. Its emphasis and focus is centred upon professional and work related experiences, practice and contexts. Whilst I use the word emphasis, it does not exclude a traditional academic research should proceed in this manner but these types of study might be more problematic to undertake. This is due to issues of access to the research field, not having a ‘special’ insight to issues and problems from a professional perspective and may lack a historical perspective that is bound by organisational actors, professional codes of conduct, culture, language and symbols, all of which are a function of professional engagement over a period of (some considerable) time. Therefore, the features of collaborative and participative practitioner-based research can be summarised as follows:

1. It is contextually based in an organisation
2. The researchers professional practice is bound up with the research topic and questions
3. It is concerned with ‘real life’ application of research outcomes to inform and improve professional practice
4. It is evolutionary in ‘real time’
5. It emphasises decision-making processes
6. It emphasises organisational change and/or practice
7. It emphasises tacit knowledge as a means to access and interpret organisational life
8. It is highly reflexive
9. It is highly reflective
10. It demands a collaborative approach with fellow professionals
11. It contributes to new/original concepts/methods/knowledge/theory/techniques and insights to advance professional practice
12. It focuses upon transferability of outcomes not generalisabilty

As such, collaborative and participative practitioner-based research is hermeneutical in nature as it focuses upon organisational contexts, their understanding and interpretation of events from both a historical, cultural and contemporary professional perspective. It is the hermeneutical understanding of organisational contexts encapsulated in the twelve points outlined that defines collaborative and participative practitioner-based research from traditional academic based studies. Therefore this style of research does not hold exclusively to any particular methodologies, methods or procedures. As such, it can be pragmatic in nature or can have a single focal theory to examine professional and organisational practice.

References


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