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Managing Action Research: the PEArL Framework

Donna Champion

Abstract The difficulty of managing and validating Action Research field studies has been widely discussed. Several different approaches to Action Research have emerged, and one of the most widely used models is Checkland's FMA model, where a framework is provided to facilitate interested individuals in 'recovering' the route of the inquiry. In this paper, I argue that the FMA model is a valuable tool for planning the application of theoretical ideas in a practical situation, but that, as a guide to Action Research, it still fails to provide a sense of the manner in which an inquiry is undertaken. The PEArL mnemonic has been previously offered as a guide to facilitate researchers, participants, and those interested in gaining an appreciation of the manner in which an inquiry is conducted. In this paper, it is argued that applying the PEArL elements does not provide insight into the dynamic nature of collaborative inquiry. In order to gain a sense of the manner in which an inquiry was undertaken it is necessary to apply the PEArL mnemonic alongside a framework that facilitates the flow of the action research cycle. To illustrate the framework, an Action Research field study is described that was undertaken with residents and key workers in a shelter for the homeless, where the aim was to create a shared understanding of complex needs and support requirements.

Keywords Action research · Managing change · Authenticity · Integrity · Validity

Introduction

The lively and uncertain nature of collaborative inquiry provides a challenging and often ambiguous dynamic situation that can be hard to manage and one that is often difficult to

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make sense of and understand. Action Research was developed as a framework for undertaking rigorous inquiry within collaborative organisational settings and it differs from other research approaches in the active engagement of the researcher in both the inquiry and the action process. First, the contributions of the FMA model (where F is a Framework of ideas; M the Methodology applied and A the Area of concern) Checkland (1985) and Checkland and Holwell's (1998) notion of *recoverability* are evaluated as means of organising Action Research. It is suggested that the FMA model and the notion of recoverability offer valuable support for guiding the application of theoretical ideas in a practical situation, but that these tools alone are not sufficient as they do not facilitate collaborators and researchers in gaining an appreciation of the *manner* in which an inquiry process is undertaken; when working collaboratively with others, the way in which research is conducted is as important as establishing the validity of the final outcomes. Champion and Stowell (2003) have offered the PEArL mnemonic (P—Participants, E—Engagement, A—Authority, r—relationships[1] and L—Learning) as a tool to support an Action Researcher in managing the way in which an inquiry is conducted, but the mnemonic offers only a guide to which elements should be considered during collaborative inquiry. In this paper, it is argued that the mnemonic alone is not sufficient, and that there is a need for a framework to guide the dynamic nature of an inquiry process. The framework and mnemonic were applied together in an action research (AR) field study undertaken with the residents and key workers in a shelter for the homeless. The outcomes of this work are described and it is suggested that more work needs to be done to offer tools and methods to help to develop awareness of the manner in which inquiry in social situations is undertaken, particularly in the AR field. Such tools would be of value in the training of new action researchers and also facilitate the communication of ideas to others with little or no training in the practice of AR.

Planning and managing action research

The difficulty in establishing that an AR inquiry has been undertaken with due care and attention, or rigour, was commented on by Susman and Evered (1978) in their seminal paper on Action Research. Susman and Evered (1978, p. 588) argue for ''...a cyclic process with five phases: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating and specifying learning''. They suggest that such an approach can encourage communication and problem-solving procedures amongst those involved, such as self-help skills (Susman and Evered 1978). Bargal et al. (1992) also identify a continuous cyclic process of planning, action and evaluation as being central to AR. Although planning and preparation are essential, Susman and Evered (1978) and Checkland (1983) argue that *predicting* the learning outcomes from an inquiry within a social setting is not possible and so inquiry within such situations ought to be agnostic to the outcomes of the research. Checkland (1983) explains the concept of agnostic inquiry as not directing ''...the learning outcomes towards some perceived to be desired end''. Checkland and Holwell (1998) also argue that planning activities and specifying learning outcomes, whilst essential, does not necessarily facilitate scrutiny by an interested individual, not involved in the actual inquiry process. To address this Checkland (1985) has argued that in order to recognise any relevant findings when researching in social situations, the intellectual framework used must be declared in

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[1] The small 'r' for relationships has been used deliberately by Champion and Stowell (2003) to emphasise this element as being the most important element of inquiry within human situations.

advance. Checkland offered the FMA model as one means of scrutinising the research, *if* F, M and A are all declared in advance (Checkland 1985). Also Checkland and Holwell (1998) have argued that a notion of recoverability is useful for establishing the validity of a social inquiry process. Recoverability offers the idea that interested individuals are facilitated in following the route of the inquiry, or 'recovering' the inquiry process, so that the learning outcomes are understandable to other interested individuals.

The strength of applying the FMA model to guide the planning and implementation of Action Research is the support offered to reflection upon the application of theory to problem situations and the practical outcomes of an inquiry. But Dash (1999) has pointed out that although participants in the inquiry may welcome practical outcomes, longer term effects and wider ongoing implications of an intervention can be ignored in this approach. Checkland's work on the FMA model (1985, 1999) emphasizes the importance of practical outcomes as being one of the means whereby the validity of the research is established. However sometimes we can learn as much, if not more, from failure. Also in order to be able to apply the FMA model properly and from a position of understanding, a considerable degree of education and training is required. But if we are to fully engage a wide and diverse team, Action Research methods should be open and accessible to all, and so they need to be easy and quick to learn and understand. This is a significant challenge as managing collaborative inquiry is a complicated undertaking requiring sensitivity and empathy as well as rigour and intellectual ability.

Collaborative inquiry

One of the characteristic features of AR is the direct collaboration of the researchers with others in whatever problem situation is the focus of attempts at improvement. This collaboration is what makes each AR study unique, but unless we consider the way in which participation and collaboration has been achieved we are in danger of assuming that participation of itself is sufficient, obscuring the uncomfortable reality that 'participation' can too easily result in a single opinion dominating all others (Tsoukas 1993). Williams argues that:

> ''honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final. It does not seek to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response. And it does all this by showing in its own working a critical self-perception [...] it makes clear [...] that there are ways in which it may be questioned and criticized''.
> (Williams 2000, p. 5)

This must also apply to academic research, where it becomes essential to make public not only the academic rigour that underpins the design and management of an inquiry process, but also the manner in which the research is being, or was undertaken. If we only focus on the actual research outcomes, we evade the complex way in which we ourselves create our own knowledge about a situation. Subjective judgements are not a distortion of some 'objective reality'; our understanding is created from our own values, beliefs and from our relationship with and commitments to others connected with the issue of concern. The challenge then is to create an approach to inquiry, where the underpinning principles, the method *and* the means of conducting the inquiry provide a framework for rigorous inquiry whilst also being open to question, flexible and easy to understand. Only by

opening up the different aspects of the inquiry process to scrutiny will we establish that we have taken due responsibility for our actions and so be accountable for our intervention.

Inquiring within socially constructed human situations requires an acknowledgement of the continuously constructed and reconstructed social world in which we live and an acceptance that nothing is ever finally and completely understood. The way in which an inquiry process is being (or was) conducted, or the manner in which the inquiry is being (or was) undertaken is an essential facet of social inquiry, a facet referred to here as the character of the inquiry process. The character of a process of social inquiry is unique for each participant and is continuously changing. Social inquiry undertaken in a collaborative manner offers opportunities for creating shared meanings, building trust and so creating new insights, and potentially also participation in action to *hopefully* bring about improvement. Whilst it is important not to follow a prescriptive model, or method, approaches that lack some form of structure and discipline will not be productive; some form of organisation and management of the learning process is essential (Checkland 1999). The FMA model and a notion of recoverability are very useful here to offer insight into the application of theory to practice, but as a means of organising collaborative inquiry, it does not offer much insight into the manner in which an inquiry has been conducted, or into the manner in which it might be planned and undertaken.

Champion and Stowell (2003) have suggested that the elements of PEArL mnemonic can act as a guide to gaining some appreciation of the character of an inquiry process and for communicating the character of an inquiry process to others. But the mnemonic alone does not provide any sense of how an intervention develops throughout the inquiry process. What is also required in addition to the mnemonic is a sense of the flow and development of the inquiry process, from the inception of research ideas, through to planning and undertaking the intervention and ongoing reflection, particularly as in action research these activities can potentially occur over a considerable time period. As stated earlier, Susman and Evered (1978, p. 588) have set out ''...a cyclic process with five phases: diagnosing, action planning, action taking, evaluating and specifying learning'', but there are some problems with this view of the action research learning cycle. First Susman and Evered (1978) (along with Checkland 1985) insist that the research process belongs to the academic researchers; collaborators get involved in the process after the research ideas have been mapped out. This would suggest that truly collaborative research is not actually occurring. Second, gaining clarification and understanding of problems does not always lead to the design of courses of action that might bring improvement. Indeed difficulties can often be created through social and environmental factors ''which have their origin at some considerable distance from those ultimately subjected to them'' (Smail 2001, p.160). Hence a different approach is required.

Rather than keep the research aspect of an inquiry away from the participants, it is important to collaborate at *each and every* stage of the inquiry. Involving the collaborators at every stage from research design, through planning, undertaking and reflection, means that it is also important to reflect upon how the PEArL elements change throughout that process. In addition, it is also essential to emphasize the ongoing nature of action research. This means that the researcher(s) must ensure they plan for ongoing involvement in a situation and for future reflection in order that the longer term outcomes of any intervention, including planned outcomes, improvised or unplanned outcomes are acknowledged. This is essential so that the academic researchers acknowledge and accept their responsibility for the longer term outcomes. The framework in Fig. 1 provides researchers with a guide for planning, managing and reflecting back upon on the changing character of a social inquiry process as it progresses.

Fig. 1 The Cycle of Inquiry in
Action Research
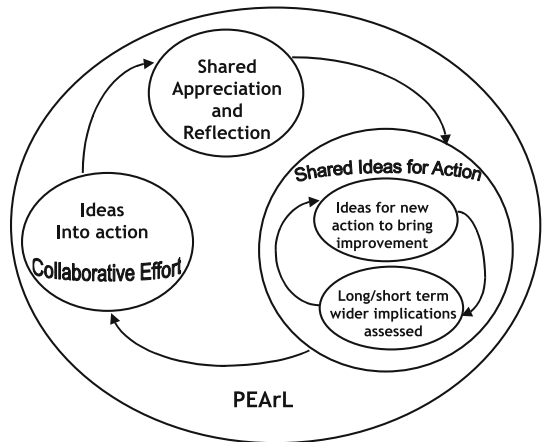
Applying the PEArL mnemonic and the framework together offers a guide for both planning a field study and for reflection on how this thread of human endeavour is related to the past and how it may influence the future. In order to provide an example of the application of the PEArL framework, an Action Research field study that was undertaken with the residents and key workers in a hostel for the homeless is described below.

The PEArL framework into practice

The hostel project

Historically, involving homeless people in the design and implementation of the services they need has been regarded as being problematic, but recently, there has been a move to encourage homeless people to become more involved in the design and delivery of their support services. In the UK there are a number of organisations that have a duty of care towards people with complex needs, such as the homeless, but each different organisation has a different funding stream and different priorities. For example, Turning Point is an organisation set up to address health and social care issues, but not employment and housing issues, so clients may have some of their needs met, but fall back into home-lessness, as they are unable to secure employment.

The hostel, which acted as a host for the field study, is run by a charity and provides move-on accommodation for clients that are homeless, but who need support to move onto permanent accommodation. The aim of the key workers is to help each client to address the issues that caused them to become homeless, and in that process help them towards a less chaotic lifestyle that will help them to stay in permanent accommodation. The work involves counselling, an intimate knowledge of the benefit system and building links to other services, such as Turning Point, Social Services, the Probation services and the Police. One of the main challenges in resettling residents into the community is how to begin to address the many and diverse problems each resident faces, whilst at the same time supporting them in developing a new life away from their old acquaintances and social network, many of whom are still involved in drugs and associated crime. Before each client leaves the hostel to move into more permanent accommodation, a support network is set up to help the client to readjust to life and maintain their routine. The key

workers at the hostel have considerable experience in developing support systems for their clients, but when working with new clients, the difficulties of helping someone transform their life from chaos to a more structured existence remained. The key workers were keen to develop practical and client-friendly tools to facilitate the residents participating in the design and implementation of an appropriate support network.

The aims of the project were first to work with the key workers on some of the problem issues they experienced in managing the hostel. During this phase of inquiry new tools would be developed to support the key workers in their work when discussing the residents' complex needs and also to improve the way in which in the support networks were developed. The PEArL mnemonic and framework were to be applied in order to facilitate discussion about new ways of managing the development of the support networks, it was also hoped that the project would provide an opportunity to learn more about the application of the PEArL framework in practice.

The PEArL framework phase 1: developing a shared appreciation

The starting point for any collaborative undertaking ought to be a process of developing a shared appreciation (Vickers 1965) of problem issues, the aims of the project and how it is to be managed. This was undertaken by considering each of the elements of the PEArL mnemonic. A summary of the outcomes of this exercise is provided below:

Participants

The key workers were the main participants in the first phase of the research, though several volunteer members of staff were also included, as they expressed a desire to be involved. The project was led in the early stages by an academic researcher who had considerable experience working as a volunteer in homeless shelters. After an initial phase focussing on problem issues faced by the key workers, the inquiry entered a second phase to focus on the problem of developing support networks; this phase included the residents and external clients (mainly ex-residents now in the community).

Engagement

In the first phase of the inquiry, the lead researcher introduced various methods of problem structuring such as Rich Pictures, Systems Maps and Mind Maps, to manage an exploration of some of the problem issues faced by the key workers in their work and also to pass on these skills. PEArL was also introduced as a tool to reflect upon the manner in which various activities were undertaken. Various problem issues were identified by the group and ideas for improvement were formulated and in addition, the key workers gained experience using these tools for themselves.

Authority

In any social situation there are usually various forms of authority in operation. For example, in the hostel situation, volunteer workers have no financial or administrative

authority within the centre, but often have considerable life experience and local knowledge that can be useful and their contribution is highly valued. The key workers act as a team, where in theory no one is more senior than anyone else, but again long experience of work with the homeless has resulted in some members of the team having more authority and their opinion was often sought by others. At the start of the project, as the lead researcher, the academic was invested with intellectual authority due to knowledge of the methods and tools being used; the lead researcher also had wide experience of working in homeless hostels and this gave authority and authenticity to the project.

It is important to state that involvement in this project was completely voluntary for everyone, at every stage, so each person had (and still has) the authority to engage or withdraw from the project at any time.

relationships

Relationships between workers and residents; or between volunteers and residents can be very difficult to manage in the hostel setting. Residents often have a history of unstable lives and can have serious mood swings due to drug addiction, mental health problems, other health issues, or simply due to the inability to trust because of past abuse. This sometimes makes for difficult working conditions and part of the work that is undertaken by the key workers is to support the residents in building new lives and social networks; this is seen as key in helping the residents avoid past destructive behaviour and unhelpful acquaintances, such as those still using drugs. Some of the work carried out in the sessions with the key workers focused on the difficult relationships between the residents and various external agencies such as the police and probation service, and on the problems this creates for key workers and residents alike.

Learning about the PEArL framework

Action research is intended to be a collaborative endeavour (Rapoport 1970) and the initial appreciation phase of the framework underlines the importance of encouraging participation, engagement and a shared appreciation of the problems to be addressed at an early stage. The learning outcomes from this phase of inquiry underlined the difficulties that the residents faced in reintegrating into the community. For example, it became apparent that there is a chronic lack of community life to support individuals with complex needs reintegrating into society. Many of the workers and volunteers who support the hostel are involved in various church groups (though not all) and it is the local church community who usually provide a new social network and sense of belonging for residents. For those that find religious groups unpalatable, there are few options. Some support is offered through the local college where residents attend training courses and the workers at the shelter organise some social events for past and present residents, though these can be infrequent due to lack of funds. The key workers reported that it is notable that those that gain a sense of belonging with a group are more successful in making the transition from an unstable lifestyle to a more settled existence and community structures that offer this sort of support are much needed.

The PEArL framework phase 2: developing shared ideas for action

There were several tangible outcomes of the initial sessions with the key workers; the key workers (and also some residents) became proficient in using Rich Pictures, Systems Maps, mind maps and PEArL. In addition, some ideas for ways that the running of the hostel could be improved were created and also more collaborative ways of designing the support networks were identified. One of the problem areas identified by both key workers and residents was the difficult relationships that were often experienced between the hostel staff and various external agencies such as the Police, or Probation Services. These difficult relationships developed because of bad behaviour by the residents at times; through a perception of the hostel overusing some local resources such as ambulance services and due to stereotyping of the homeless. The tensions and problems often affected the smooth running of the hostel. For example, visits to the hostel from the police to ask about drug crime could affect the atmosphere in the hostel, which could in any case often be volatile. From a staff perspective, if residents became stressed it was more likely that there would be a drugs or alcohol related incident that may require an ambulance; but if the hostel called the ambulance station too often within a short period this affected relationships between the hostel and health staff at both the ambulance station and the hospital. The relationships between the hostel and external agencies were thus identified as being in need of improvement. It was decided to organise a meeting between the hostel workers and the police officers whose beat included the hostel as the first means of addressing the problem relationships. After the success of this session, a decision was taken by the key workers to include other community workers such as staff from the local college where residents attend training and also staff from the local ambulance service.

The PEArL framework phase 3: ideas into action

Addressing problem relationships

The initial meeting between the key workers and the police officers from the local station established a link to facilitate communication. The outcome of this meeting has resulted in the key workers organising a more formal network between the hostel (including the residents and external clients) and external agencies including the police, probation services and the local training college. It is anticipated that representatives from Social Services, the Job Centre and from Turning Point will also be invited to future meetings. This activity has widened participation in the work of the hostel to include these external groups and has also opened up the possibilities for external agencies to become engaged in work to address some of the problem issues that affect the different participants in the network in different ways. During an evaluation meeting, PEArL was reapplied to the project and the result (produced below) illustrates the widening of involvement:

Participants

Key Workers, Volunteers, Residents and Clients, Police, Probation Services, lecturers from the Training College, Social Services, the Job Centre and workers from Turning Point.

Engagement

Formal network to discuss problem behaviour and to address the specific challenges facing each group. The aim of the network is to improve the relationships and understanding between the participants and to help the residents and clients reintegrate into society.

Authority

In the first meeting the key workers expressed their view that it was important for some of the residents to learn to respect people like the police, probation officers and to appreciate the responsibility to the rest of society that these professions held. One resident commented that it was important for residents ''...to learn how to deal with authority figures in a positive way'' and this is one of the aims of the network—to facilitate the residents and clients coming to appreciate the work of the external services.

relationships

Each of the meetings so far has been organised around a theme. For example, the residents have been given the opportunity to tell some of their stories to the professionals and the professionals are being given the opportunity to explain their work. One theme was called ''How to explain to a Benefits Officer that the information they have is incorrect''. It is hoped that this approach will lead to the residents and clients developing more positive relationships with the professionals they meet.

Learning

The new network is a positive step forward, but this is just one of the practical outcomes that have arisen from this work. Other initiatives to improve the social networks of residents and clients are in the planning stages and it is hoped that other improvements may follow and that the outcomes will offer structure and support over a considerable period of time. One of the other practical outcomes already evident is the new skill base of the key workers.

Key workers applying new skills

The key workers have applied their new skills in their interactions with the residents and also with their external clients. One example is included below to illustrate the way in which the key workers are applying their learning in practice.

   J is 18 years old. She regards herself as having no family, though in fact J's mother is alive, but the relationship is a difficult one and J has decided that contact with her mother will cease. J was evicted from her housing association flat as she had stopped paying the rent. She is an alcoholic and a smoker and she has experienced severe health problems, which have been exasperated by living on the street for 14 months. She had applied for a place at the hostel during her stay at a 2 week Christmas shelter that operates in the area every year. Prior to entering the hostel, J had spent a great deal of her time in a nearby city passing time in parks and libraries with other homeless people, many of whom had drug or alcohol addictions.
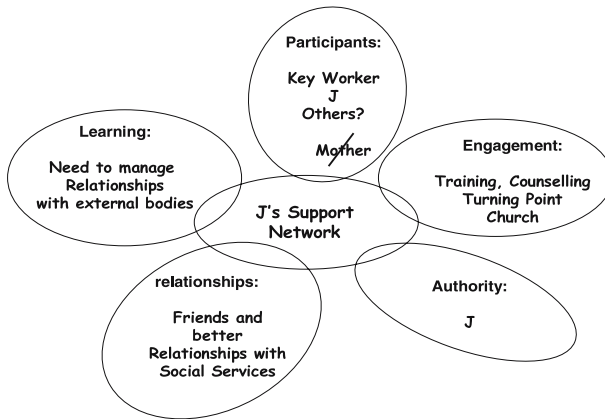
Fig. 2 Key worker and J thinking through support issues using PEArL

   At first J expressed the view that only her key worker would be a participant in the support network she would need once she gained permanent accommodation, but recently she has made friends with another person on her training course (J is attending English and Maths courses at a local college) and can now sometimes imagine that others might provide some support for her too. In addition to her training and her sessions with her key worker, J also has regular counselling sessions and visits Turning Point, an external government funded organisation for help with her alcohol addiction. J's key worker decided to use PEArL as a framework for getting her to think through what kind of support she would need when she moves back into the community. PEArL was used to help J express her views on the difficulties that she would face on re-entering permanent accommodation. (Fig. 2)

   Working with people with complex needs takes a great deal of time and patience. J often has panic attacks and can have periods when she reverts back to the opinion that she has no options and no future. J's key worker has found the elements of PEArL useful as a framework for helping J to think through the process of what support she may need in the future. The next step for J will be to undertake a fact finding mission to ascertain what housing support she might receive when she re-enters permanent accommodation. J does not want to do this, as she finds dealing with personnel at Social Services very difficult due to having caused scenes in the past when drunk. She realises she will need to re-think her approach to people who work in the service organisations.

The PEArL framework: reflection and appreciation again

Undertaking inquiry within social settings is ideally never-ending with nothing ever being finally and completely understood. And so the cycle of inquiry comes full circle to begin again, hopefully from a position of improved understanding. Reflecting back on practical outcomes and on the manner in which the inquiry has been conducted thus far is an important characteristic of Action Research. This part of the research process will include writing up and making sense of the experience; it will include the re-conceptualisation of theory and of new forms of practice. The project described here is a long term project and it

is too early to comment on the long term impacts and wider implications of this work, the research continues and future work will address this aspect of the work in a collaborative manner. The focus in this paper has been reflecting upon the way in which each of the elements of PEArL change as a process of social inquiry unfolds. This project has made clear the need for guidance as to how to manage the *manner* of engagement in social inquiry in fresh and creative ways, so as to encourage new ways of thinking and working, with sufficient space for freedom of thought and action and sufficient discipline and structure to facilitate learning. Opening up the character of a social inquiry to scrutiny and response is a significant challenge. The PEArL framework does offer some response to that challenge. Applying PEArL as a guide to managing and reflecting upon the manner in which an inquiry is undertaken will not guarantee that the outcomes will be successful. No approach can guarantee results in complex, fluid social situations. The PEArL framework can help those interested (whether they were involved in the inquiry process or not) to gain a sense of the way in which the process of learning and change was managed and the manner in which the inquiry was conducted and so hopefully can draw attention to those elements of human inquiry that are often ignored in many research reports. We need to pay attention to the small details, as it is these that mark the distinction between indifference and passionate engagement.

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