

When Action Research meets Management Research and Business Strategy- the need for a new approach

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Reporting on a recent a comprehensive research program into MBA education in the US, Harvard professors Srikant Datar and David Garvin, and their research associate, Patrick Cullen recommend that MBA curriculum need to:

Continue to experiment with and commit to new pedagogies and techniques, especially those that involve action learning, field experiences, and reflective exercises... Knowledge must be grounded in readily applicable frameworks that help to translate theory into practice.

(Datar, Garvin & Cullen (2010) Rethinking the MBA. (HBS Press)).

While suggesting that the Harvard findings could be equally well applied to Australian MBA and Management programs, this paper argues that Australian universities and businesses are poorly placed to embrace this particular recommendation. It also argues that the current popular narratives concerning the history of systems thinking and its relationship to Action Research as defined by what we might describe as the “Soft Systems School” and its “Critical School” makeover don’t provide the level of epistemological and logical rigour required by “conservative” management schools, nor the level of “practicality” required in the business world.

Instead, this paper argues that we need to dig into the foundations of Action Research as found in the work of Dewey and Kolb, for example, and turn to contemporary interpretations of the classical thought of the founder of American pragmatist philosophy, C.S.Peirce. In particular, it is worth understanding that Peirce’s architectonic simultaneously addressing dilemmas resulting from the Cartesian separation of mind and body, and the Darwinian emphasis on emergent phenomena. To achieve this we must understand Peirce’s triadic approach to phenomenology and the implications of Peirce’s assumption of human fallibility in which scientific results are only ever provisional, and his demands for the adoption of pluralist approaches and “communities of inquiry”, not so much for reasons of power and equity, but for checks and balances in the search for meaning and explanation.

This approach reveals the logic of Action Research as being associated with “open systems” as defined by Fred Emery, and the logic of laboratory science (as applied in most management research) to “closed systems”. In turn this allows us to understand the management process as being associated with the formation of the “hypothesis to the best explanation” and its subsequent implementation, monitoring, and critical evaluation. (Business examples relating to the application of this approach will be cited). Furthermore, this approach aligns with that proposed by Kolb in which dialectic is formed by interpreting strategic issues (such as the global financial crash, the Victorian bushfires, and the development of OH&S policies) from the perspectives of multiple world hypotheses identified by Stephen Pepper (World Hypotheses, 1942) and in which the “Contextualist Worldview”- classical pragmatism- provides the key “learning” dynamic.

Finally, an approach to the design of experiential graduate management programs as defined by the pragmatist approach, and emphasising pluralist approaches to systems thinking and the rigour of action research, will be described and illustrated with reference to a proposed development at the University of Queensland.