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The action research cycle reloaded: Conducting action research across buyer-supplier relationships

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ABSTRACT

Buyer-supplier relationships in purchasing and supply chain management practice are instrumental and often “messy”. Indeed, the buyer and the supplier generally interact while pursuing their own interest, which are often subject to change over time. The action research method can help address the complexity of buyer-supplier relationships, generating important theoretical insights and relevant managerial implications. First, action research helps the researcher to better understand the problem by integrating diverse perspectives. Second, it allows the researcher to influence the buyer-supplier relationship directly, providing mutually beneficial solutions. This study proposes action research as a suitable interactive method that could complement other methodologies in the field of purchasing and supply chain management, as well as in other fields. An expanded action research framework – the “action research cycle reloaded” – is proposed and the role of the action researcher in the buyer-supplier context is discussed. The framework is applied to study the design and implementation of a supplier performance measurement system in the banking industry.

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1. Introduction

Action research can be defined as an emergent inquiry process that integrates theory and action to couple scientific knowledge with existing organisational knowledge and to address real organisational problems together with the people of the system under inquiry (Coghlan, 2011; Shani and Pasmore, 1985; Rapaport, 1970; Lewin, 1947). It is a participatory and collaborative approach and is aimed at bringing change to organisations, developing competences, and contributing to scientific knowledge through a co-inquiry cyclical process (Coghlan and Shani, 2014; Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Shani and Pasmore, 1985).

The epistemological underpinnings of action research are grounded in so-called Mode 2 knowledge production, defined and discussed as being antithetic to the traditional Mode 1 approach (Bartunek, 2011; Hodgkinson, 2001; MacLean et al., 2002; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Gibbons et al., 1994). In the Mode 1 approach, knowledge production occurs mainly as a result of an academic agenda. In the Mode 2 approach, knowledge production requires collaboration among academics and practitioners across different academic disciplines; it is developed through a

knowledge-in-action process aimed at solving real and context-embedded issues and entails different methodologies (e.g., intervention research, clinical inquiry, appreciative inquiry, collaborative management research, action science, action learning).

The two contrasting modes still animate a vibrant debate within the management research community that is centred on the rigour-relevance gap in managerial research (e.g., Kieser et al., 2015; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009; Shani et al., 2012; Kieser and Leiner, 2009; Bartunek and Rynes, 2006). On the one hand, some Mode 1 scholars claim that collaborating with practitioners may bring a lack of rigour to the research process (e.g., Kieser and Leiner, 2009). On the other hand, Mode 2 scholars show how, in the last decade, much of the management research appearing in top-rated journals has been of little relevance for most practitioners (e.g., MacLean et al., 2002; Bartunek, 2011; Zhang et al., 2015).

In the last decade, authors within the Mode 2 research community have supported the adoption of Mode 2 research methodologies and, more specifically, action research within disciplines such as operations management (e.g., Coghlan and Coghlan, 2002; Waring and Alexander, 2015; Avella and Alfaro, 2014; Hoss and Ten Caten, 2013; LaGanga, 2011) and supply chain management (e.g., Braz et al., 2011; Seuring, 2011; Ottmann et al., 2011; Näslund et al., 2010; Koplín et al., 2007; Schoenherr et al., 2008). These disciplines have historically been dominated by Mode

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1 empirical research.

The present study aims at investigating the potentialities of action research within purchasing and supply management (PSM) research, focusing in particular on buyer-supplier relationship issues, such as: mutual capability development (e.g., integration, collaboration, trust, visibility), supply chain (SC) process coordination (e.g., order cycle management, a supplier development program, transportation optimisation), strategic supply chain management (SCM), and purchasing practice implementation (e.g., an SC performance measurement system, vendor managed inventory, consignment stock, just-in-time supply, SC finance) (e.g. Flynn et al., 2010; Cousins, 2005; Eltantawy et al., 2015; González-Benito, 2007; Luzzini et al., 2014; Paulraj et al., 2006).

The main argument of this paper is that the traditional Mode 1 approach could be fruitfully integrated with Mode 2-oriented studies. The Mode 2 approach allows for the addressing of an increasing complexity derived from the joint presence of the buyer and supplier organisations. In particular, within the different methodologies belonging to the Mode 2 family, action research could successfully involve both parties (the buyer and the supplier), thus solving practical problems and proposing win-win solutions. As the main output, the paper proposes a revised version of the traditional action research cycle (see Coughlan (2011), Coughlan and Coughlan (2002)), tailored to face buyer-supplier relationship issues with three interacting parties: the scholars, the buyer organisation representatives, and the supplier organisation representatives. It is re-labelled “the action research cycle reloaded”.

To properly contextualise the problem and address previous issues, the remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section discusses the Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 research approaches and their diffusion in PSM scientific literature in greater depth; a reflection on the suitability of Mode 2 for addressing buyer-supplier relationship issues is reported. Section three describes and extends the traditional action research cycle, proposing the action research cycle reloaded to manage buyer-supplier research projects. Section four presents a real instance of the implementation of a supplier performance measurement system (PMS) to exemplify the steps of the methodology. Final remarks end the paper, discussing the action research distinctive characteristics in respect to other case-based methods and identifying limitations, future research trajectories and contribution.

2. Action research in purchasing and supply management

This section describes the current methodological scenario in PSM (and, more generally, in SCM) literature, looking for possibilities of adoption for action research. The first paragraph introduces the distinctive features of Mode 1 and Mode 2. The second paragraph reports some data concerning the diffusion of various methodologies within the PSM field, addressing recent literature review studies. The third paragraph highlights how the Mode 2 approach can be a valuable complementary approach to Mode 1 when dealing with buyer-supplier relationship issues.

2.1. Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 research

Authors (e.g., Bartunek, 2011; Hodgkinson, 2001; MacLean, 2002; Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Gibbons et al., 1994) distinguish between Mode 1 knowledge production and Mode 2 knowledge production. Mode 1 occurs mainly as a result of an academic agenda, and “Mode 1 problems are set and solved in a context governed by the largely academic interests of a specific community” (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 3). In addition, Mode 1 aims at universal knowledge production, which should be context free. The

Table 1.

Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 knowledge production methods (from Coughlan (2011)).

	Mode 1	Mode 2
Aim of research	Universal knowledge Theory building and testing within a discipline	Cogenerated actionable knowledge produced in the context of application
Type of knowledge acquired	Universal covering law Primarily cognitive	Particular, situational
Nature of data	Context free	Contextually embedded
Validation	Logic, measurement Consistency of prediction and control	Experiential, collaborative, transdisciplinary
Scholar's role	Observer	Actor, Agent of change Socially accountable
Scholar's relationship to setting	Detached, neutral	Immersed, reflexive

measurement of variables should follow a logical linear measurement procedure, and the scholar should be as detached as possible from the phenomenon under inquiry (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; MacLean et al., 2002; Coughlan, 2011). By contrast, Mode 2 requires collaboration among academics and practitioners across different academic disciplines “rather than heroic individual endeavour” (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998, p. 347), and scientific knowledge is developed in the context of application. This mode assumes as a starting point the problem in practice, which leads to the development of a research team to address it (Starkey and Madan, 2001). Moreover, Mode 2 research is trans-disciplinary, heterogeneous, socially accountable, reflexive, and produced in the context of a particular application (MacLean et al., 2002; Gibbons et al., 1994). Both Mode 1 and Mode 2 can adopt research tools such as surveys, case studies, and other analytical processes to gather and analyse data. What differentiates Mode 1 from Mode 2 is the detachment of the scholars in the former and a tight collaboration with practitioners in the latter. Table 1 (Coughlan, 2011) illustrates how Mode 1 and Mode 2 may be juxtaposed.

On the one hand, Mode 2 is useful for practitioners because it starts with a problem or relevant phenomenon (e.g., Coughlan, 2011; MacLean et al., 2002; Gibbons et al., 1994). On the other hand, scholars can extract and abstract a massive amount of information about practitioners, praxis, and practice with the aim of generating knowledge (e.g., Zhang et al., 2015). In doing so, scholars can participate actively in organisational life and people from the system can participate actively in research (Pasmore et al., 2008).

Though Mode 1 is predominant, in management research, there is a healthy, animated debate on the appropriateness and usefulness of Mode 1 vs. Mode 2 research processes. A recurring concern that much management research is becoming more and more detached from management practitioners' realities, making it minimally relevant for them, has fostered the debate (e.g., Schein, 1987; Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Fincham and Clark, 2009; Radaelli et al., 2014). To address this point, Mode 2 scholars claim that Mode 2 reflects the ontological status of management research more faithfully than Mode 1 does (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998). Nonetheless, the mainly positivist approach of the Anglo-Saxon academy is not confident with Mode 2 methodologies (Greenwood and Levin, 1998), denigrating forms of research that incorporate action and collaboration with practitioners as being at risk of subjectivism (e.g., Kieser and Leiner, 2009). In response to this, the Mode 2 community points out that Mode 2 research is misleadingly evaluated based on positivist Mode 1 standards (Cirella et al., 2012; Bartunek, 2011; Coughlan and Shani, 2014; Pasmore et al., 2008; Eden and Huxham, 2006), leading to the conclusion that Mode 2 lacks rigour. It is

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