Opinion article

An action researcher in an advisor's hat: A short reflection on lessons the OECD has learned from undertaking action research in the realm of policy and politics

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Abstract: Action research has enormous potential for policymakers, and those who advise them, to work in more iterative, reflective, and collaborative ways. For complex systems facing wicked problems, any approach that gets it closer to framing a problem well and drawing upon diverse forms of knowledge to bring about change, is good. Advisors who do action research in policymaking or political settings should be sensitive to the fact that this methodology may confound expectations regarding the 'traditional' advisor role. As such, some careful navigation of this approach (and what it means for the relationship and perception policymakers may have with those they engage to advise them) is required. This opinion piece shares lessons from an advisor working in the OECD's innovation team, which embraced the action research methodology to reflect on and design innovative policy interventions with public sector policymakers. Action researchers who are using this methodology to produce policy advice may be more successful in auguring, and better navigating, new kinds of relationships with government if they heed the following lessons: frame the value of action research with decision makers, diversify your data and follow the story, and prime practitioners to participate.

Key words: International organization; OECD; evidence based policymaking; policy advisory; policy advice

Un investigador-acción en un sombrero de asesor: una breve reflexión sobre las lecciones que la OCDE aprendió al llevar a cabo una investigación-acción en la esfera de las políticas y sobre política

Resumen: La investigación-acción tiene un enorme potencial para que los formuladores de políticas, y quienes los asesoran, trabajen de manera más interactiva, reflexiva y colaborativa. Para los sistemas complejos que enfrentan problemas perversos, cualquier enfoque que los aproxime a encuadrar bien un problema y recurrir a diversas formas de conocimiento para generar cambios, es bueno. Los asesores que realizan investigación-acción en la formulación de políticas o entornos políticos deben ser sensibles al hecho de que esta metodología puede confundir las expectativas con respecto al papel de asesor "tradicional". Como tal, se requiere una dirección cuidadosa de este enfoque (y lo que significa para la relación y la percepción que los formuladores de políticas pueden tener con aquellos a quienes contratan para asesorarlos). Este artículo de opinión comparte lecciones de un asesor que trabaja en el equipo de innovación de la OCDE, que adoptó la metodología de investigación-acción para reflexionar y diseñar intervenciones de políticas innovadoras con los responsables de la formulación de políticas del sector público. Los investigadores-acción que utilizan esta metodología para

producir asesoramiento sobre políticas pueden tener más éxito en dirigir y pronosticar mejor nuevos tipos de relaciones con el gobierno si prestan atención a las siguientes lecciones: encuadre el valor de la investigación-acción con los tomadores de decisiones, diversifique sus datos y siga la historia, y prime por los mejores profesionales para participar.

Palabras clave: organización internacional; OCDE; formulación de políticas basada en evidencias; asesor de políticas; asesoramiento sobre políticas.

Action research is a useful methodology for policymakers, as it grounds general theories about change in the daily reality of politics and policymaking. For those of us who advise policymakers, helping them puzzle through particular policy issues, action research offers us a way to collaborate with our counterparts, build their practice, and produce relevant and readily useful knowledge. Yet, this methodology challenges the typical way governments see and value advisors who work with them, because this approach departs from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) more traditional research. This research has historically been characterised by the amassing of comparative statistics, for example, or one-off assessments or reports of governance arrangements or policies and delivered it to public sector managers, who may (or may not) communicate findings to their practitioner staff. This is something the OECD's Observatory for Public Sector Innovation (OPSI) has reflected on recently, as we seek to build new research traditions within these hallowed halls.

OPSI is a small team within the OECD, that works directly with governments to help them understand innovation, and the governance, systems, and organisation structures that best foster it. To do our work of helping governments innovate better, we need a methodology that allows for dynamism and collaboration with diverse (and perhaps unexpected) actors across a policy system, helping us to work with these actors to design, implement, and reflect on innovative policy interventions. While action research is well suited to public sector innovation projects, it is a new approach for this historic organisation. The OECD (and perhaps by extension any other major research or advisory organisation) is often seen as an 'arbiter' of knowledge. People seek its advice because it offers certainty or an imprimatur. For policy advisors like us who know the value of action research, and want to introduce it into OECD projects, going a little against the grain, the activity can bring to the fore interesting tensions relating to knowledge and power. What forms of knowledge are valued? Who gets to contribute to its creation? Who has the power to act on it? From my experience, I have derived a few lessons that other action researchers might find useful. This opinion piece canvasses a few considerations others may want to keep in mind if they are put in the role of 'external expert advisor' (whether they like it or not!) and want to subvert this mantle by using this research approach to work differently.

Lesson one: Frame the value of action research with decision makers

Action research brings about change through a recursive, self-reflective cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting, in active engagement of practitioners who create contextually relevant knowledge. If you are working with a government on a joint research project, you should ask yourself, are the decision makers who commission and fund action research with

you fully cognisant of what this approach entails? Are they comfortable with it? What expectations do they bring to bear on the kind of knowledge produced in this way? What does a milestone look like in this context? What needs to be reported along the way, to whom, in what way?

I have found that decision makers may hanker after quick wins, or be more accustomed to working with expert advisors on projects that have more traditional, linear forms of management, or those that have deliverables that are ends in themselves, as opposed to precursors to next phases.

I think it is important to take the time to understand what decision makers know about this research approach, and elucidate which parts of the intervention or change process is especially important to them. Be aware that decision makers may have to justify the approach to others who may not have a depth of understanding of its nuances, but are invested in its success.

For example, OPSI managed an action research project that entailed mixed methods research design: a quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and a series of workshops to plan for upcoming system interventions in a government department. We were aware that the project's decision makers (high-level public officials) needed to justify a strong course of new action to bring about organisational reform to their minister, and to show leadership to other government departments that change was both needed and possible. Understanding these needs, we tailored our communication with them to give primacy to the quantitative results in a timely fashion. This gave them a quick snapshot of where their department was at in its change process, and was something they could easily communicate to their own stakeholders and champion the continuation of the project. Even though other research methods in this project were just as robust as the quantitative phase, we knew hard numbers had currency with them (at least until they got more comfortable with a new approach and contending with different data sets) and communicating these early and succinctly increased their comfort with a new way of working on a policy challenge.

Lesson two: Diversify your data and follow the story

How can action researchers make sense of conflicting observations, and sensitively steer people to ask different questions, or open up new avenues of exploration? How can they use differing stories to shape actions or interventions?

Going back to my previous example, an interesting tension I found in our mixed-methods data was the disjunction between the snapshot the quantitative results gave, and the bigger story the qualitative data yielded. If we looked just at the survey, the government department wanted to adopt a particular organisational model and showed moderate, but not complete, progress on its full implementation. Qualitative research opened up space to comprehend organisation culture more deeply, the systemic issues affecting both its business-as-usual practices, its innovation, and how it related to other parts of the public sector. If this model were to be implemented, these are the challenges that it would face.

Data showed it was both close and so far from this goal.

Reflecting on this with practitioners took an interesting turn! We had organised a data gathering session, aimed at developing a typology of existing activities that could be associated with each of the model's characteristics, in an attempt to apprehend status quo organisational operation. In creating this typology, we asked 'how does your department do X?". People parried with sarcasm. We got more than a few answers that were just simply: 'badly'! That is not an aberration in the data, that is dissent that is crying out for acknowledgement. We knew then that subsequent actions needed to address organisational feedback loops (who contributed feedback on certain activities, whose feedback was valued, and the organisational capacity to act on it for example). The discrepancies in the data prompted further probing which, in turn, created a space for practitioners to express themselves. A takeaway from this anecdote is that it is useful to employ different methods, not just for the purposes of validation, but to be able to read different forms of data against themselves to examine what is missing or inconsistent. When reflecting with practitioners, allow for emotional reactions as much as intellectual ones, and follow your nose to explore *what* is trying to reveal itself.

Lesson three: Prime practitioners to participate

Action research compels practitioners to reflect on their own practice and, through this, help them to build new practice and capabilities. But…what if practitioners are not ready to do this? How can action researchers negotiate practitioner trepidation, resistance, cynicism, or just plain inexperience with participatory research processes?

One way to overcome these perceptions is to prime practitioners to participate. When OPSI was presenting to our practitioner counterparts, we found ourselves in a familiar set-up: us up the front, with a microphone, and them in seats quietly listening. The way we were occupying space encoded a power relation that was not serving the research: our practitioners were quiet, there was no buzz in the air. So, my colleagues paused the presentation and solicited audience participation and reflection, using an online survey tool that people could access on their mobile phones. We polled practitioners on their perceptions of change so far and upcoming challenges. The online tool rendered their responses in real time, creating graphs and word clouds that were flashed up on the presentation screen. Immediately, the audience of practitioners shifted from passive listeners to active creators of the presentation, as it unfolded. Effectively, this mirrored the input process into action research in a succinct and tangible way. The room's energy shifted. Side conversations bubbled up. The poll was not substantive data collection, just something to get people thinking and talking, ahead of the workshop. Yet, this small priming activity helped change the perception of 'who talks' and 'who doesn't' in a room, and got people into a reflective mindset.

Another example of how we primed practitioners was by teaching them a specialised listening and learning method called 'ritualised dissent' (Ritual Dissent – Cognitive Edge, 2020). In a workshop, practitioners developed ideas for possible actions the next phase of research could take. Members of a group visited other groups as 'travelling critics', while some members stayed to be 'idea presenters'. The travelling critics listen to a presentation of possible actions. This method stress tests thinking before the practitioners fully invest

(emotionally, structurally, and financially) in the next interventions. This kind of rigour early on in the idea process is essential, given how common 'path dependency' is in large public sector organisations, where people continue to do what has always been done simply because the power of inertia is stronger than the capacity or desire to innovate. This method shakes people out of the tendency to 'go along to get along' and, instead, encourages them to say "are you assuming too much of this…?" or say, "perhaps you're forgetting that…" or "I think some unforeseen consequences could be…". By teaching practitioners a method to foster reflection and feedback, they were empowered to critique each other. In this context, my colleagues and I faded into the background as light-touch facilitators and scribes of these conversations. This helped overcome the tendency for them to turn to us for approval when asserting their ideas. They were appraising themselves. Priming practitioners to participate, through activities that 'warm them up' or teach them new skills can shift dynamics and yield rich information, in important ways. The power of finding little ways to disrupt power dynamics in this kind of research context cannot be understated. It matters.

Over to you...

Doing this kind of work within an organisation like the OECD, where this approach is not especially known or popular, we face the challenge of needing to build awareness and practice of what this approach is, and what it can do for the countries we work with (and, the corollary, what it is decidedly *not* and what it *cannot* do) so we have a more systematic way of choosing what projects might benefit from this approach. We also need to sensitise more people to understanding, valuing, and using the empirical evidence generated through action research engagements, to expand people's understanding of what constitutes 'evidence' and what such evidence might be useful for. We are not there yet. Action research is new. It is different. These cultural shifts take time especially in historic organisations such as mine. I think the fight is worth it, though.

Ultimately, action research has enormous potential for policymakers, and those who support them, to work in more iterative, reflective, and collaborative ways. For complex systems facing wicked problems, any approach that gets it closer to framing a problem well and drawing upon diverse forms of knowledge to bring about change, is good. Advisors who do action research in policymaking or political settings should be sensitive to the fact that this methodology may confound expectations regarding the 'traditional' advisor role.

You will have to work actively to help renegotiate relationships and expectations, in order to do this kind of work properly. If you are thinking about undertaking action research in the realm of policy and politics, understand what others know of this approach, and meet people where they are at, staying abreast of what decision makers will need from you in order to continue championing your project and the insights it yields. Pay attention to what stories your research unearths and follow your nose, even if the story is not flattering. Be sensitive to how power is conceptualised and embodied in the research process, and do things that actively try to redress it. Building people's practice and encouraging them to participate in research is the kind of empowerment that needs to be felt in the room, in the body. If you are an action researcher in an advisor's hat, mastering that last part is truly the feather in the cap…

Sources

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