

ARTICLE

Dissemination in action research

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ABSTRACT

Lewin proposed three goals for action research: to advance knowledge; to improve a concrete situation; and to improve behavioral science methodology. The three objectives cannot be met by a single mode of dissemination. Innovative dissemination strategies will be necessary. Action researchers should publish substantive articles in technical journals to reach colleagues; applied articles in periodicals read by practitioners and the public; and methodological and reflective articles in associational and professional journals designed to improve the practice of action research.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- communication
- dissemination
- dual dissemination
- media

Relative to mainstream behavioral scientists, those who use an action research (AR) framework have special needs and obligations in dissemination. Lewin (1946) proposed three goals for AR: first, to advance knowledge; second, to improve a concrete situation; and third, to improve behavioral science methodology. For Lewin, AR meant action on a realistic level followed by self-critical, objective evaluation of results, with the aim of ‘no action without research; no research without action’ (Marrow, 1969, p. 193). This approach blurs the boundary between research and practice and highlights their relatedness (Bargal, 2006). The three objectives cannot be satisfied by the traditional scholarly article in a research journal read by colleagues. Innovative dissemination strategies are necessary (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Eikeland, 2006). This article will focus on the print media, while accepting the importance of online mailing lists, Web pages, blogs, lectures, films, video, TV and radio interviews, and personal consultation in the diffusion of research findings. To cover these non-print media would result in undue length (perhaps a book) and dissipate the message of the present article.

Within the realm of print media, AR calls for different articles in a variety of outlets. This is not a single article published multiple times, but different pieces tailored to different audiences, including substantive articles in technical journals to reach colleagues; applied articles in periodicals read by practitioners and the public; and methodological and reflective articles in associational and professional journals designed to improve the practice of AR. Whether one’s collaborators write their own articles is up to them, although the researcher should provide encouragement and assistance when requested.

I first began using action research as part of the 1950s mental hospital reform movement, before there were networks and associations of action researchers. I learned through practice that intense participation with the end users of the information aided in the dissemination and utilization of research findings. Later I confirmed this more systematically comparing participatory and non-participatory research in an experiment with six funeral co-ops (Sommer, 1987). My community at the time of the mental hospital studies, and this has continued in other contexts, consisted of the people with whom I collaborated in turning the environment into information and learning into discovery. Hospital staff at all levels became co-researchers to form what Robert Hutchins (1968) called a questioning community, in which participants learned the value of research-based information. Later when I applied this approach in a variety of other settings, my communities continued to be people whose information needs that could be met through participatory research. We joined collaboratively in these endeavors, in which my distinctive role was that of a research consultant who advised the group on information-gathering techniques, data analysis, and dissemination. I made suggestions and recommendations but the group had the final cut in question wording, sampling, and other critical features of the

research. This approach dictated the use of non-journal outlets to disseminate research findings.

I will now discuss dissemination in terms of Lewin's three goals for AR.

Goal number 1

Lewin interpreted the advancement of knowledge in terms of contributions to the research base of the behavioral sciences and to theory. For mainstream social psychologists, this was accomplished by publishing rigorous studies in social psychological journals. In contrast, Lewin and his associates published most often in other types of outlets.

Redefinition of the researcher's role is another feature of AR relevant to the advancement of knowledge. Simply put, the researcher does not 'own' or control a study. A 10-year research collaboration I maintained with a family support organization illustrates the role redefinition that may be necessary (Sommer, 1992). This group had a decentralized, democratic structure. There was no central mailing list of members and local chapters operated autonomously. Throughout the collaboration, it was difficult to maintain a standardized research procedure. As a consequence, I defined my role as working with the organization and its members in trying to find answers to *their questions*. The members were not helping me with my research; instead, I viewed myself assisting the group with *their research*. I endeavored to see that data collection remained ethical, but the group had the final say in question wording, survey length, coverage, and sampling. In terms of dissemination, my research assistants and I collaborated with the group on writing small articles for mental health journals and producing newsletter articles, a pamphlet, and talks at chapter meetings.

Goal number 2

To improve a concrete situation means that the participants are better off after the study than before. They should receive something directly from the research, not simply gratitude for helping science or pie-in-the-sky assurance that all advances in knowledge make a better world for everyone. Dissemination is a means by which a researcher can give back to the participants. The researcher can provide information and advice they can use to improve their situation. Clearly the feedback must be delivered in a form and with content that lay persons can understand.

Co-authorship for participants is a tangible form of reinforcement, raising a person's status in the group and outside. Academics are accustomed to seeing their names in print but this can be a new experience for a lay person. In my work with the parents support organization mentioned earlier, co-authorship greatly enhanced communication of the findings inside and outside the group. Publica-

tion was viewed as enhancing the group's legitimacy in dealings with officialdom. Reprints of published articles were sent to county officials and state legislators and distributed at chapter and statewide meetings. I had not previously witnessed such widespread distribution of published articles. This outcome did not result from the novelty or quality of the studies, which were bread-and-butter self-surveys of group members, but instead reflected the perceived ownership of the research by the organization and having its members as authors.

Goal number 3

Improving AR practice is much easier today than in Lewin's time with the appearance of journals such as this, reaching a community of action researchers whose editors and reviewers are more amenable to activist studies. AR practitioners also use associational and professional journals, as contrasted with basic science journals in the behavioral sciences. Most fields have periodicals of this genre which publish reflective, historical, and analytic articles and commentary. These journals reach colleagues and practitioners, but not the public.

A tripartite framework for dissemination

My relationship with a client organization may end at consultation in survey design and implementation, but very often I am asked to provide input into dissemination. The obvious first product will be an internal report for the group. I can help in various ways – seeing that the write-up accurately reflects the results of the study; the implications of the findings are properly drawn; confidentiality has been respected; and limitations of the research clearly stated. I will tactfully comment on style, layout, and spelling, as a report with many grammatical and spelling errors or poor layout lacks credibility.

Following the internal report, the question may arise as to whether external dissemination is warranted. Given the multiple goals of action research, this is often the case. A survey whose results are useful to one local organization may be useful to others doing similar work, which suggests publication in a regional or national periodical. In some cases the study will have wider implications, making it suitable for a trade magazine; or there may be novel aspects of method or sampling that would interest other researchers.

Figure 1 provides a framework for dissemination in AR. My primary outlets for applied articles have been periodicals intended to reach members of a specific occupation or organization involved in the collaboration. When our research group conducted studies with a range of consumer cooperatives (food, housing, funeral, and preschool), we first published the results in co-op newsletters and magazines aimed at members of the organizations. These brief articles

Research	Article	Periodical	Audience	Goal
basic	substantive, technical	research journal	colleagues in specialty area	advance knowledge
applied	applied	trade or occupational journal	practitioners, public	improve a concrete situation
action	methodological, reflective	professional journal	action researchers	improve practice of action research

Figure 1 A tripartite framework for dissemination in AR

included no theory, no literature reviews, no statistics other than means and percentages, and no behavioral science jargon. However, it was necessary to follow the style and terminology of the co-op movement; for example, we found that the term ‘child care co-op’ offended groups who considered their settings to be preschools which implied a program, in contrast to child *care* which they saw as passive child-minding. We also had to distinguish between consumer coops owned by their members and managed by a hired staff, and collectives owned and operated by the member workers.

In addition to periodicals aimed specifically at co-op members, the second stage of dissemination involved research journals outside the behavioral sciences. When we studied food choices of co-op shoppers, we published the results in nutrition journals. An article on the role of co-ops in consumer protection appeared in *Policy Studies Review*, while their educational role in encouraging wise food choices appeared in the *Journal of Nutrition Education*. Other articles were published in journals of agricultural economics, food technology, and home economics. These were technical papers written in the style and jargon of specific fields of study rather than of behavioral science disciplines. We also used non-journal periodicals, including so-called ‘glossies’ such as *Progressive Grocer* to reach the food service industry.

The third line of dissemination came near the completion of the project. These were analytical and methodological pieces written exclusively by the researcher and based on field notes kept throughout the collaboration in the tradition of reflective practice (Schon, 1983). The goal of these publications was to improve the practice of action research.

Research with farmers’ markets, a collaborative project with a state Department of Food and Agriculture, followed a similar sequence. The following

list shows the range of publications aimed at different audiences stemming from this project. Authors' names and reference citations are omitted as irrelevant and to save space.

- Internal reports: Customer surveys for individual markets. Multiple locations.
- Trade and occupational magazines: 'Farmer's markets please their customers', *California Agriculture*.
- 'Farmers' market resurgence – Landscape design implications', *Landscape Architecture Forum*.
- Behavioral science research journals: 'The behavioral ecology of supermarkets and farmers' markets', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*.
- Research journals outside the behavioral sciences: 'Quality of farmers' market produce: Flavor and pesticide residues', *Journal of Consumer Affairs*; 'Regional-seasonal patterns in produce consumption at farmers markets and supermarkets', *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*.
- Articles intended to advance practice of AR: 'Local use of survey data: Impact of research findings on farmers' markets', *Human Relations*.
- Local research: *Journal of Social Issues*.
- Trade book: *Farmers markets of America*.

Collaboration with activist tree-planting organizations produced internal reports first, followed by articles in applied journals in landscape architecture and arboriculture. This laid the groundwork for subsequent theory-driven cross-national studies of preference for tree shapes published in basic science journals. Accounts of the research also appeared in associational journals.

A similar sequence of outlets characterized a 10-year collaboration with the family support organization mentioned earlier. First, there were internal reports written for the groups themselves, followed by applied articles in mental health periodicals, and last by reflective and methodological pieces describing what was learned from the collaboration.

Our research team did not rely exclusively on print media. We consulted, gave slide shows, gave media interviews, and lectured. In some instances, we wrote pamphlets for the organizations showing them how to do their own research; for example, for the consumer co-ops, we wrote pamphlets distributed by a co-op literature service on doing action research, on conducting surveys, and making systematic price comparisons (Figure 2); for the parents support organization, there was a pamphlet of the special problems faced by women clients in the mental health system. If we were doing this research today, we would make greater use of electronic dissemination.



Figure 2 Pamphlets used to encourage consumer co-ops to conduct their own research

Incentives for non-journal publication

When I discuss writing outside the discipline, the question arises as to how one's colleagues will respond. More specifically, how will promotion and tenure committees react to articles in newspapers, general magazines, trade periodicals, and journals outside psychology? To a degree, the answer depends on the candidate's affiliation. In an applied setting, the question would not arise, as one would be expected to publish outside a discipline. In the majority of academic settings, such as community colleges, technical colleges, and state universities where publication is not required, non-journal articles would be considered a plus as they bring recognition to the department and institution. It is at research universities that the question is most pertinent. Even here there is no unanimity. I teach at a research university classified as by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as RU/VH or 'Very High Level of Research Activity'. However, it is also a land grant college where faculty are partly evaluated on their public service. Articles outside a discipline are expected in fields such as Environmental Studies, Community Development, Child Development, to mention only a few with

significant social science representation. Even in disciplinary departments, I have found prejudice against non-journal publication to be overrated. My colleagues in psychology are pleased when one of us publishes a trade book, or has an article in a major newspaper or national magazine, or appears on television. Often the newspaper article or book cover will be displayed somewhere in the psychology building and notice of a TV appearance will be circulated on the department Listserv. Professor David Canter of Liverpool University cites a similar experience:

I always get more reaction to my articles in *The Times* [of London] than to any journal publications. I have published two 'trade' books, as well, that are seen as mass market publications, but I find that students even to PhD level are happy to cite this work. I am rather proud of the fact that one of my books [on behavioral profiling] won an award for Best Crime Non-fiction in the US and the UK, an award very much for 'popular' books yet it is regularly cited in [doctoral dissertations]. So the divide between the two forms of outlet is not as great as many people think. I wrote and presented a six-part TV series that was shown on BBC America and Sky TV, so was very much a popular show, but my graduate students all want to watch it as well. (D. Canter, personal communication, 5 February 2007)

I am not advocating the neglect of journal publication. Presumably a faculty member who practices AR will publish some articles in disciplinary and associational journals, particularly the reflective methodological papers in the third row of Figure 1, in addition to non-journal outlets aimed at practitioners and the public. Research journals are intended for internal communication within a field or discipline. They are not written to be accessible to lay readers. One could try to change this by making basic science journals more intelligible and accessible to the public. I see no reason to make this recommendation. Journal style and format are efficient for their purposes. The approach I have described elsewhere involves dual dissemination (Sommer, 2006); that is, writing separate articles for colleagues and for the public that are published in different types of outlets.

What does this mean for a junior faculty member who practices AR and chooses to publish exclusively outside a discipline? If the person is housed in a disciplinary department, this is probably a mismatch and the person should be advised to transfer to a department representing a field of study where applied interests are better respected. On my campus, as on many others, there are more psychologists outside the psychology department than inside. AR has historically had more acceptance in departments of education, business, and applied behavioral science than in psychology (Sanford, 1970).

For those who train graduate students, it is important to tell them that for *most* positions in government agencies, non-profits, and higher education, non-journal publication is valued. Most colleges are not 'Research Universities: Very High Research Activity' by Carnegie Foundation criteria, and hiring committees

will view research-based articles in newspapers, magazines, and newsletters as a plus on a CV. An elitist model of publication is not in the interests of most graduate students.

Conclusions

Relative to mainstream behavioral scientists, action researchers have special needs and obligations in dissemination. According to Lewin's prescription, they must contribute to knowledge, including theory development, perhaps not on every project but at some time. I will not know in advance when collaboration with a grassroots organization will produce this result. I hope it will occur, but in most cases, it doesn't. For me, advances in sharable knowledge in AR interventions have been more serendipitous than planned. Keeping detailed field notes allows these unplanned outcomes to be translated into journal articles.

Action researchers must communicate research findings to participants and to other lay people. Within print media, this can be accomplished through a variety of outlets such as newsletters, newspapers, trade journals, and general and specialty magazines. Few behavioral scientists are trained to do this type of writing. Indeed we are socialized in journalspeak which is not audience-friendly. In addition to training students in APA style, AR programs should train students to write for non-journal outlets.

Within the AR community, there should be discussion of substitutes for peer review in non-journal articles. To minimize errors and gaffes, I use informed lay people in this capacity, particularly people who participated in the research who are likely to interpret terminology and meaning differently than do university colleagues. Action researchers must continue to communicate with one another to improve the practice of action research. Journals, books, mailing lists, associations, and conferences emphasizing AR interventions have made this easier than it was in Lewin's time.

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