PREFACE

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The field of research known as information systems (IS) is largely dedicated to the understanding of how computer systems and related technologies (e.g., communication technologies) affect human behavior. This is done mostly in the context created by organizations and social groups; although there are examples of IS investigations involving single individuals. While the field of IS started taking shape as a distinct area of research and education in the 1960s, it builds on inventions, methods and ideas that date back at least to the 1940s. One notable invention without which the field of IS would probably not exist is the computer. Most accounts of the history of computing suggest that the first computer was the ENIAC, developed at the University of Pennsylvania in 1946.

IS research and education has come a long way since the 1960s. It is not uncommon to see IS programs in universities, particularly in colleges of business, as among the most successful in terms of student enrolment. Many doctoral programs with IS concentrations exist. There is also a vibrant and relatively large global IS research community, which congregates on a regular basis in large conferences such as the International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS). Much of what the field of IS has become up until today is due to the work of several pioneers. Among the IS pioneers are Peter Checkland (who is also an action research pioneer), Gordon Davis, Peter Keen, Scott Morton, and Charles Stabell. Today the field of IS gravitates around a few international associations, notably the Association for Information Systems (AIS).

According to most accounts, action research has emerged as a distinctive research approach soon after World War II. From its inception, it has been viewed as a research approach where the investigators try to find solutions to problems faced by their research clients – which can be individuals, groups, or organizations – while at the same time producing knowledge that can be used

to develop or refine theoretical models. That is, in action research the investigators produce and refine theoretical knowledge approximately at the same time as they try to improve a problematic situation facing their research clients.

The history of action research suggests that it has been independently developed by one individual, the late Kurt Lewin, and one key institution, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.

Kurt Lewin received his doctorate from the University of Berlin in 1914, served in the German army during World War I, and later joined the Berlin Psychoanalytic Institute as a faculty member. He moved to the United States in 1933 and worked for approximately 10 years at the University of Iowa, later moving to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There he remained until his premature death in 1947. Lewin is believed to have coined the term "action research".

The Tavistock Institute was founded in London in 1946, through a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, as an action-oriented research organization. One of the main goals of the Tavistock Institute was to develop and use innovative approaches to treating mental disorders resulting from individual exposure to events related to World War II. Of particular concern were the traumatic experiences underwent by military personnel, as well as their effects on those individuals' behavior and societal integration after their return from the battlefield.

Often action research is seen as a research approach that has been originated outside the United States, that has little to do with the American research tradition, and that is largely unrelated to the development and funding of research in the United States. In fact, in a number of disciplines (including information systems), action research finds a lot more acceptance in academic circles outside the United States than within. Some notable examples are England, Scandinavia, and Australasia.

One interesting aspect of the historical accounts outlined above is that they highlight the fact that the past relationship between action research and individuals and organizations based in the United States is a lot closer than many are led to believe – at least based on action research's scarce promotion and use in American academic circles. For example, Kurt Lewin pioneered action research while in the United States, even though his experience in Germany must have played a role in forming several of his ideas. Also, the Tavistock Institute has been founded with support from a high-profile American foundation, namely the Rockefeller Foundation. Among other things, the Rockefeller Foundation is widely known for its unwavering support of innovative social research, chiefly but obviously not exclusively in the United States.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of acceptance of action research in American circles is that it is often seen as opposed to the predominant mode of

research employed in business schools in the United States. (The same is largely true for American schools of science and engineering as well.) That predominant mode of research is characterized by a focus on quantification of behavioral phenomena, and the use of sophisticated quantitative analysis techniques. From an epistemological perspective, that mode of research is most closely associated with the positivist epistemology.

American business schools seem to house most academic departments dedicated to IS research and teaching, which appears to have led to an interesting situation. While action research is in many ways a very good match for IS inquiry, because of the utilitarian and problem-solving nature of most IS applications in organizations, its use in the field is dwarfed by that of research approaches that are better aligned with positivist notions. Estimates suggest that action research accounts for less than one percent of all IS research. The lion share goes to experimental, survey, and case research.

Several researchers have been concerned about the situation above, a concern that has often been enhanced by a deep interest in action research's potential to be used for IS research. One of those researchers is Richard Baskerville, perhaps the most prominent figure in the IS action research community today. Richard organized a workshop on IS action research at Georgia State University in October 1998, which I had the fortune to attend. That workshop planted the seed for the first special issue on IS action research published in 2001 by the journal *Information Technology & People*, which I guest-edited together with Francis Lau, and led me to ultimately decide to edit this book.

As it will become obvious to the readers of this book, modern IS action research is characterized by a range of views and methods. While this unavoidably goes hand-in-hand with some methodological fragmentation, it also opens up a number of opportunities for the acceptance of action research in areas that have traditionally been closed to it. It also allows for the expectation that action research can be made compatible with many epistemologies, including positivism. This latter point can be illustrated through a simple analogy. Cubism, for instance, can serve as the basis for painting employing various approaches, such as oil and acrylic painting. Similarly, I believe that positivism can serve as the basis for research employing various approaches, and action research is one of those approaches.

Yet, as it will also become clear to the readers of this book, there is no consensus among IS action researchers about action research being compatible with many epistemologies, positivism included. In fact, some openly disagree with this notion. One thing is very likely though. If cubism was practiced only by artists specializing in acrylic painting, probably those artists would be tempted to claim ownership of cubism. I wonder if something

similar is not currently happening with action research in general, and IS action research in particular.

This book is organized in three main parts. Part I, made up of chapters 1 to 6, is dedicated to the discussion of methodological issues related to IS action research. Hopefully the chapters in Part I will be useful to those researchers who are preparing to conduct IS action research investigations, so that they can better plan their research projects. Part II, which comprises chapters 7 to 12, focuses on providing exemplars of empirical IS action research studies. Part II will hopefully be of value to researchers in the future as a basis for the development of their own reports on IS action research investigations. Finally, Part III, comprising chapters 13 to 18, is dedicated to the discussion of issues that are currently being debated by IS action researchers and their critics, or that are likely to form the basis for future debate.

The range of topics covered by the authors of the chapters that make up this book arguably represents the state-of-the-art of IS action research today. Moreover, several of the chapters discuss IS action research issues that have been present in longstanding debates in the field of IS, as well as many other fields. Finally, several of the chapters in this book raise issues that are likely to feature prominently in the future debate and application of action research, not only in the field of IS, but in several other fields. Among the key reasons for these positive aspects of this book is that its contributing authors are certainly among the most influential thinkers and practitioners of IS action research in the world today, not only in IS but also in a few other disciplines. Those authors are also pioneers, and their chapters will hopefully pave the way for the future.

I am indebted to the authors for their hard work, and for contributing well researched, and truly thought provoking chapters to this book. I would also like to thank the team at Springer for their support of this book project. In particular, I would like to thank Gary Folven, for taking the editorial lead on this book project at Springer, as well as Carolyn Ford for her editorial assistance. Thanks are also due to series editors Ramesh Sharda and Stefan Voss for their comments and suggestions early on this project.

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