

## **Four contexts of action research: Crossing boundaries for productive interplay**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores how action research takes place within and between four contexts: adding practical value, improving institutions, developing professions, and contributing to theory. We argue that action research is more than those activities conducted within these contexts: it is a process of handling the generative tensions in the boundary regions. Framing action research this way has proven helpful in recasting such tensions as meaningful, in thinking through research designs in teaching and practice, and in paying sufficient attention to boundary work. This model for conceptualizing action research has been refined over two decades of practice and reflection by the authors.

### **Keywords**

Action research, context, tension, contradiction, boundary work, design

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### **Introduction**

Action research has grown to take on many different forms that do justice to diverse situations and needs (e.g. Bradbury, 2015; Noffke & Somekh, 2013). However, this diversification of approaches has made it easier to lose sight of common principles, and it has made it harder to select which combinations of action and research are best suited for specific situations. Typologies seek to clarify the many possibilities, such as the ‘27 flavours’ framework of action research (Chandler & Torbert, 2003), which distinguishes types of action research along the dimensions of voice, practice, and time. While such typologies enable the classification of diverse forms of inquiry (e.g. Bradbury, 2016), they do not provide guidance in tailoring an action research project to a specific situation.

We developed our views on action research through our work as scholar-practitioners, having our institutional ‘home’ first in consultancy and second in education and academia. We have found it useful to emphasize distinctions between the types of situations that practitioners often face. This began 20 years ago in acknowledging the divergence within action research projects between the needs of various actors (such as managers, workers, educators, researchers) and their institutional settings (such as client organizations, workplaces, schools, academia). Over time our experiences and insights have evolved into a recognition and modelling of four contexts of action research that we present here. This view of action research has proven useful in multiple ways: for collaborators, it has provided a common language and legitimized tensions as meaningful, and for practitioners, it has aided us in thinking through action research designs and encouraged us to pay more attention to boundary work. In this paper we present a metaperspective of action research as an activity spanning multiple contexts, discuss the tensions in the boundary regions between contexts, and present three ways to apply this approach, each illustrated with a case

### **The multiple contexts of action research**

#### ***Action research as a triangle***

In his only paper on action research, Lewin (1946) describes a ‘change experiment on minority problems’ that aimed to train community workers in Connecticut to address race relations, as an example of ‘experimental comparative studies of the effectiveness of various techniques of change’ (p. 145). Interestingly, he hardly reports on his findings other than a few realizations, including that intergroup relations are a two-way affair, which means that so-called minority problems are in fact majority problems. Instead, Lewin focuses on ‘the tremendous pedagogical effect’ that the research activity had on the training process. The research activity in question involved recording: observers, group leaders, and trainees gave daily reports on leadership and group development in the training groups by speaking into a recording machine, apparently while in each other’s presence. The result was an ‘atmosphere

of objectivity’ and a ‘readiness by the faculty to discuss openly their mistakes’ (p. 149). This generated:

“a mood of relaxed objectivity which is nowhere more difficult to achieve than in the field of intergroup relations which is loaded with emotionality and attitude rigidity even among the so-called liberals and those whose job it is to promote intergroup relations”. (p. 149)

Lewin’s excitement about the impact of introducing research activities into emotionally charged situations may still resonate with present-day action researchers. He concludes that we should consider action, research, and training ‘as a triangle that should be kept together for the sake of any of its corners’ (p. 149). The action-research dichotomy was thus identified, in the earliest writing on action research, as more accurately a trichotomy.

A fourth area of focus emerged from studies on participation in the world of organization and management. The Harwood experiments, which involved operators in designing and implementing changes in production methods, showed that such changes not only improved productivity but also reduced aggression and turnover (Coch & French, 1948). This gave rise to theories of participative decision-making (McGregor, 1960; Likert, 1961; Tannenbaum, 1968). Building on McGregor’s suggestion that managers examine the fundamental assumptions they make about human beings, Argyris (1971) unravelled the dynamics that enable or frustrate managers’ examinations. He observed that attachment to control, rationality, and position reduces the probability that an organization will produce valid information, reach effective decisions, and commit to the decisions made. He also noted that a commitment to inquiry and experimentation stimulates such examination. Argyris’s work reveals ‘organizing’ and ‘learning’ to be ‘essentially antithetical processes, which means the phrase “organizational learning” is an oxymoron’ (Weick & Westley, 1996). While learning is not necessarily impossible, the refusal to handle this tension makes it so. In this vein we see the fourth context of action research: the promotion of organizational learning by management to develop institutional responsiveness. The apparent duality of action and research can thus be better understood to encompass four domains: action, research, training, and institutional development.

### ***‘Different kinds of people’***

In the seven decades since Lewin’s work, professional practice, research practice, training practice, and institutional practice have each become more distinct as fields of professional activity. We may be practitioners, researchers, educators, or managers, each role with its own contexts, practices, and methodologies. The upside is a boost in performance as each field has developed a specific logic for communication within its speciality; the downside is the loss of capacity to communicate with other fields due to syntactic (language), semantic (meaning), and pragmatic (practice) differences (Carlile, 2002). Underestimating these boundary issues leads to tensions and conflict and – when unresolved – poor performance.

We see such boundary issues early on in the field of organizational psychology, notably between the UK and USA research communities that were both inspired by Lewin’s

work. The UK community combined people with backgrounds as socio-clinical psychiatrists and social scientists in the 'Tavistock group' and had conducted action research projects in the British army during the war, while the USA community had done work on food habits and community relations. They came together in the 1949 London conference to discuss their work on group dynamics. Both communities had focused on group interactions and presumed their motives might be similar, but their loyalty to different contexts instead created alienation. Trist (1997, p. 677), who attended the conference, describes it thus:

“What transpired was that our crowd in the UK were headed in the direction of taking up projects in the real world. ... [T]he American group had now located themselves in a university ... and had begun to turn in the direction of academic research on propositions dealing with group theory. ... We continued to publish together the journal *Human Relations* ... but we had discovered that we were different kinds of people.”

Lewin (1946) saw the study of laws and the study of specific situations as enhancing each other. He referred to engineering institutions like MIT who turned more and more to basic research and expected basic research to follow applied research in 'social engineering' as well. This is however not what happened in the management sciences. The business school reform of the 1950s was based on the reversed expectation that applied research should follow basic research: generalizable knowledge would be applied after it was tested scientifically. But this is also not quite what emerged. Instead we have had a debate for 60 years about the gap between 'rigor' and 'relevance'. Kieser and Liener (2009) have studied this debate and conclude that the logic of basic research is incompatible with the logic of applied research: they have conflicting organizing principles and prescribe different actions, goals, and means. One cannot follow both logics at the same time. Most scholars follow the logic of rigorous research, while merely talking about responding to the practical needs of management. Bullinger, Kieser, and Schiller-Merkens (2015) interpret this as a compromise that follows management scholars' strategy of compartmentalizing their work into separate scholarly and practical realms. They publish in separate outlets, either for academics or for practitioners, and for the latter only later in their careers. When writing for practitioners, they rarely utilize their research findings. And when they do so, their recommendations generally do not correspond with the scientific results reported in their academic articles (p. 443). So when it comes to practice, scholars are not that rigorous at all.

Similarly, many organization development practitioners claim action research as a preferred method, but their activities often focus on developing organizations and professionalizing management, rather than contributing to scholarship. Vansina (2008) and Feltman (1992) critique consultants for spending too much time in boardrooms and training centres rather than in the lived reality of how organizations add value; they conclude that there is too little action in action research. On top of that, consultants' research activities do not necessarily translate into knowledge that can withstand scientific scrutiny. It may help to explain why action research still struggles to be published in top-ranked journals (Kieser, Nicolai, & Seidl, 2015, p. 165). Thus, compartmentalization is also a coping strategy for

action researchers in the field of organizational development: when it comes to building theory, they tend to be less relevant.

One pitfall seems to be the tendency to place responsibility for ‘bridging the gap’ between scholars and practitioners on just one of the parties, rather than encouraging a new type of interaction involving both sides. Just as Lewin found that ‘minority problems’ are better conceived as a two-way dynamic, we argue that ‘bridging the gap’ should be approached as a mutual effort. A new expectation about the boundary work between action and research needs to be developed, and this paper is an invitation to do so.

Of course, there are inspiring examples where boundaries between the different contexts are crossed and cooperation bears fruit. Schein is a well-known example: he developed the general practice theory of process consultancy and built theories about learning, career development, leadership, and culture. He labelled this route ‘clinical inquiry’, and posited that useful data can be gathered in situations that are not created by the researcher, but by someone who wants help (Schein, 1987, 2001). The client creates the setting and defines the subject matter, and the consultant helps the client to address these while also observing how the client responds and comparing this with theoretical models. This enhances the helping process *and* creates an opportunity to use the data to amend and improve theoretical models. Argyris and his colleagues are another good example. They have stressed the value in combining the study of practical problems with research that contributes to theory building and testing. Labelling this route ‘action science’, they posit that action theories can be developed and tested by building communities of inquiry in social practices (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Argyris, Putnam, & McLain Smith, 1985). This has resulted in an impressive range of constructs, such as organizational learning, espoused theory, and defensive routines, which have impacted the whole field of management research deeply.

With these examples in mind, we feel it is important to acknowledge the specific logics of each of the four different contexts and the types of tensions that boundary crossings often create. People live out their professional lives in different worlds, such as academia or consultancy, and action researchers are challenged to contain the feeling of being marginalized in both (Wasserman & Kram, 2009, p. 24). Put differently, none of the four contexts is our home exclusively, as we feel most attracted to the boundary regions between them.

### ***The four contexts of action research***

We developed and refined a model that recognizes four contexts in which action research takes place (Schuiling, 2001; Vermaak, 2009), which allows us to ask in each specific situation: what aspects of these contexts allow us to best suit our aims and abilities in designing our approach? In this section, we describe each of the contexts, which are visually represented in Figure 1. The characteristics of each context are delineated in Table 1.

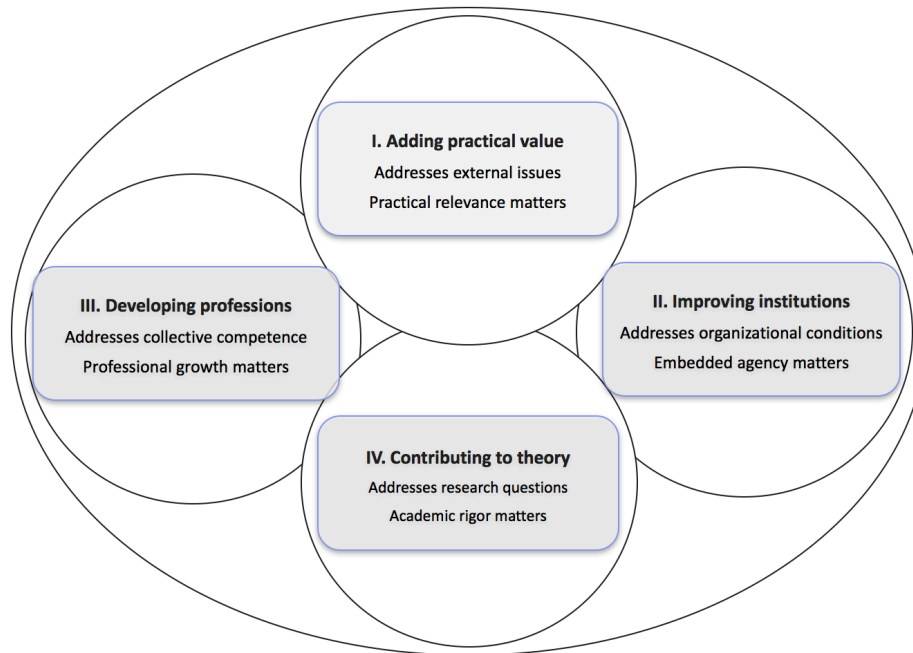


Figure 1. Action research takes place within and across four contexts.

Adding practical value: In context I people seek to create value for the outside world. The key actors here have generic labels like ‘clients’, ‘(knowledge) workers’, and ‘first-line supervisors’. In context I, people in work systems seek to meet clients’ requirements in the best way they can, and to develop the means, technology, and methods for doing so (Hoebeke, 1994, pp. 45-71). Many organizations cannot add value on their own and require collaborative arrangements between different organizations and between these organizations and their clients. Thus organizational boundaries are not the prime concern, rather the challenges at hand define who should be involved; similarly, the skills and facilitation of multidisciplinary work become important.

Improving institutions: In context II people focus on institutional arrangements for work processes. This includes aligning the internal and external environment, negotiating legitimacy and objectives with key stakeholders, and providing resources such as facilities, finances, systems, and leadership. Managers and staff are regarded as key actors here, but agency is not exclusive to them. While institutional arrangements condition behaviour, they also respond to actors’ agency in context I to challenge and improve those arrangements (Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). This may extend beyond the organizational level to larger arenas, such as an industry sector or a professional field. Success is evaluated in terms of embedded agency: have we encouraged the necessary conditions for value creation (context I) and staff development (context III)?

Developing professions: In context III people are concerned with professional development, especially of the actors in contexts I and II. For example, in context I this may involve nursing in a health care institution or process control at an industrial plant, while in context II this refers to activities common across most organizations, such as human resources, information technology, or management. In context III, educators (role models, mentors, trainers, teachers, coaches) help increase the awareness and skills of those involved (students, participants, trainees) by organizing learning environments. The educators’ role is

no longer exclusive to them as soon as participants are regarded as co-creators in learning, like in communities of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

Contributing to theory: In context IV people are concerned with building and testing theory by means of research. It addresses research questions that arise from fascinations with real-life phenomena (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) or from spotting gaps or problematizing assumptions in the existing literature (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Research is conducted to build generalizations, using a collection of concepts, their interrelationships, and the assumptions underlying both (Whetten, 1989). Theories of action can be researched from different epistemological traditions: a positivistic approach focuses on testing existing theories (e.g. Bacharach, 1989), an interpretive approach uses disciplined imagination for sensemaking (e.g. Weick, 1989), and a pragmatist approach builds and tests theories through learning to act effectively (e.g. Argyris, 2014). However divergent the perspectives are on what research is and how it should be conducted, they all seem to agree that the function of theoretical knowledge is its ability to explain and predict. Key actors in this context are the researchers, their peers, and their research objects, which depending on research orientation may also become the subjects of research.

Table 1. Distinguishing characteristics of the four contexts

<b>Context and core activity</b>	<b>I Adding practical value</b>	<b>II Improving institutions</b>	<b>III Developing professions</b>	<b>IV Contributing to theory</b>
<b>What is addressed</b>	External issues  (related to products or services)	Organizational conditions  (ranging from strategic to operational, from technical to cultural)	Collective competence  (explicit and embodied know-how)	Research questions  (deemed relevant within the academic discipline)
<b>Key actors</b>	Practitioners  (clients, knowledge workers, first-line supervisors)	Managers  (board members, department heads, professional and support staff, employees)	Educators  (teachers, trainers, coaches, students, participants, mentors, role models)	Researchers  (students, postdocs, research fellows, professors, participants, sponsors)
<b>Evaluation criteria</b>	Practical relevance	Embedded agency	Professional growth	Academic rigor
<b>Type of knowledge</b>	Practical  (based on experience; conveyed in stories and examples; captured in routines)	Institutional  (conveyed in formal policies and guidelines but also in cultural understanding)	Professional  (captured in case studies, methods, and concepts; refers to a shared tradition and identity)	Theoretical  (developed in theoretical debates, articulated in publications shared at conferences)

## Crossing boundaries for productive interplay

### *Tensions in the boundary regions*

Our description of this model emphasizes the contrasts between the contexts: each has its own processes, issues, actors, performance criteria, and so on. Though distinct, the contexts are of course also interdependent: it is hard to think of providing services or products to the outside world without organizations (contexts I and II) or conducting research without a lived experience to study (contexts I and IV). But the boundary regions between contexts also bring to light competing demands. In Table 2 we suggest some typical tensions experienced in the six boundary areas that are depicted in Figure 1.

Table 2. Typical tensions between contexts

Six boundary areas	Possible tensions	Behavioural expression
Between (I) Adding practical value & (II) Improving institutions	Self-organized activity versus managed stability and change	Can local decision making come up with tailored solutions? Or are organizational standards and methods enforced?
Between (I) Adding practical value & (III) Developing professions	Performance versus learning	Is the best person put on the job to assure optimal value? Or is less experienced staff allowed to learn on the job?
Between (I) Adding practical value & (IV) Contributing to theory	Practical relevance versus academic rigor	Is the focus on interventions to solve problems as and when they emerge? Or is the focus on staying detached and maintaining a research protocol?
Between (II) Improving institutions & (III) Developing professions	Organizational demands versus professional loyalty	Is the work driven by what managers or clients require? Or is the work driven by what a specific profession has to offer?
Between (II) Improving institutions & (IV) Contributing to theory	Managing reputation versus critical thinking	Are persuasive policies and reassuring visions striven for to reassure public and personnel? Or are dominant ideas deconstructed and anomalies revealed?
Between (III) Developing professions and (IV) Contributing to theory	Expert confidence versus academic deconstruction	Are methods generalized that have proven their worth in practice? Or are such methods questioned to find why and where they work?



To illustrate how such tensions can play out, let us look at one such boundary area between ‘adding practical value’ (context I) and ‘contributing to theory’ (context IV). An action researcher may be torn between adopting an observer stance, in which the focus is on data collection, versus taking an interventionist stance, in which the focus is on helping others. Meticulously collecting data matters especially during meaningful moments when the process may be intense and much is happening (see e.g. Erlandson et al., 1993). However, these are also the moments when the interventions are most wanted, for instance by facilitating the process or introducing new perspectives. It can be tough to combine those roles, specifically in the moments that matter most. It can however be worthwhile to attempt it in the case of ‘wicked problems’, which cannot be studied from a detached position but require the active contribution of the researcher (see e.g. Conklin, 2006). Only an active stance allows one immersion in the lived experience, sharing insights in real time and testing the efficacy of interventions in actual practice. This example thus underscores that both tension and potential synergy are present in the boundary area at the same time.

The tensions may be labelled differently depending on the specific environment and one’s orientation. Also, each local situation in which the action research takes place will show a unique constellation of tensions. What we wish to emphasize is that these types of tensions will inevitably arise and acknowledging them will prevent them from ossifying and assist those involved in learning from them.

### ***Valuing contradictions and mediating boundaries***

Tensions are inherent in organizational life, emerging from contradictory but interrelated elements. There are three types of actors’ responses to tensions. The first response is ‘either-or’. This is adequate when a deliberate choice is required by a situation, rather than being a defensive response to avoid or reduce the negative effect of tensions. In the former the interdependence of the two poles is recognized, in the latter it is ignored or masked. Suppressing one pole inevitably fuels its opposition, leading to vicious circles (Lewis & Smith, 2014). A second type of response is the ‘both-and’ approach in which the opposites are treated as inseparable and complementary. Paradoxical thinking focuses on recognizing opposites, questioning them, and shifting mindsets. Differences are explored and confronted, sharpening a type of reasoning in which people both frame the contradictions as meaningful in relation to the issues that are being addressed and deliberately switch between contexts to develop integrative solutions (Engeström, 2004). A third type of response is the ‘more-than’ approach, which involves connecting oppositional pairs, moving beyond them, or situating them in a new relationship (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016). This strategy avoids the premature closure of options by using tensions to embrace a discursive consciousness of the paradoxical situation.

Working through contradictions in this way is the heart of action research rather than a distraction from it. It requires identifying and facing the contradictions, and managing the tension they create; doing so in a skilled fashion allows one to learn from and experiment with that tension. The action researcher thus has a double task: designing and guiding the action research process and creating a ‘holding environment’ (Shapiro & Carr, 1991) in which participants can work through the cognitive confusion, emotional uncertainty, and relational frictions (Illeris, 2002) that are part and parcel of figuring out new possibilities.

A constructive response to contradictions implies acknowledging and using what another context has to offer. Each context may then internalize aspects of the others, incorporating them as subordinate processes. Take, for instance, the aim of producing knowledge in context IV (researching): the other contexts might not produce what most academics consider ‘theory’ but that does not mean they do not produce knowledge. While knowledge development is the primary task in context IV, key actors in the other contexts pursue their own type of knowing as part of their primary task (see the grey text in Table 1). Similarly, while practical solutions, organizational activities, and professional development each are the core activity in one context, they may play a subordinate role within all of the other contexts. However, there is a risk to such internalizing as it allows one to work predominantly in one context. This can obscure just how different other contexts are and thus lessen the appreciation for what they have to offer. We therefore argue for deliberately seeking productive interaction between the contexts. The most generative processes of action research seem to take place in the boundary regions, allowing one to achieve results that are beyond what is produced in any context on its own.

This raises the questions: who does the boundary work to mediate contradictions, and how do they do so? We observe two types of boundary-crossing strategies: commuting and intertwining. In commuting, skilled action researchers go back and forth between the different contexts on behalf of those involved. They transfer questions, information, principles, and concepts from one context to another. In intertwining, the action researcher invites key actors from one or more contexts to cross boundaries as well, thereby participating in the activities of another context, often beyond what they are trained for, and in so doing they experience the contradictions themselves.

Commuting is done sequentially and involves time lags. For instance, action researchers do clinical inquiry in an assignment with a client, then develop a theme that resonates with their other assignments, and then publish their findings, which in turn creates the impulse to do more research on the theme in a follow-up study. Intertwining happens in real time. For instance, several key actors in the client organization co-produce the research design and execute the research with the action researchers. The action researchers’ multiple roles are extended to these key actors, endowing them with additional roles. If, for example, such key actors typically are focussed on adding practical value (context I), they now may also learn to collect and interpret data (context IV) or support organizational learning by exploring with their colleagues the impact of new insights on existing policies (context II). Intertwining thus has the potential to have a wider impact than commuting by collaborative production in the boundary regions (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). However, complete intertwining for all actors involved across the four contexts is a likely road to mediocrity as much as one sole person commuting all contexts is unthinkable. It is thus a matter of distributing and sharing roles wisely.

## **Working with the multi-context model**

### ***Recasting tensions as meaningful amongst collaborators***

People struggle to make meaningful connections between their own context and those of others when they are not aware of contrasting logics. Even when they do, this understanding is not necessarily reciprocated by their partners, who may also be unaware. Their relationships across contexts can then easily become strained and less productive. Meaningful interactions start by moving away from blaming any one party for such trouble, which is a common response so long as their own context's logic is the implicit measuring stick. The multi-context model can be introduced as a language that invites all involved to acknowledge that each context's logic is one sided. This larger perspective is much easier to swallow than hearing one's own logic is wrong or that some logic should take priority over others. Recognizing strains or conflicts in the relationship as something to be expected can be quite a relief, opening an avenue to appreciate the differences as inherently present and potentially fruitful.

An example concerns the long-standing collaboration between police and academia in the Netherlands. It involves a wide range of parties, such as the National Police, the Police Academy, universities, consultancy firms, research institutions, funding agencies, government ministries, unions, and so forth. In early 2015, frequent discussions were held on how to increase the relevance of all the research that was being done. Many felt that the impact of research was too slow, too little, and too shallow. The Policy Academy proposed a strategic research agenda for the next five years that took centre stage in these discussions. It set common goals and advocated aligning the police's needs with what the researchers could offer. It was implicitly formulated in terms of 'supply and demand'. Though nobody strongly disagreed with the carefully worded consensus, many had their doubts that the new agenda was a 'game changer'. At that point, one of the main funding agencies held a national conference inviting key players to reflect on what it would take to change the game. We introduced the multi-context model to inquire into these doubts and make sense of them. We posited that just below the surface of the common vision were very different contexts with their own agendas, which would surely hinder easy alignment.

For instance, researchers did not consider demand-driven research wise at all, as they felt the police knew too little about doing research for that. It would not only lead to mediocre research but, and even more so, it would eliminate the independent role of academia to critique current ideas and (mal)practice. Researchers felt their role was also to create uncomfortable knowledge because professions and institutions that stifle critique tend to degenerate. In contrast, many at the top of the National Police felt that they had their hands full handling political and public critique and deemed it not in their interest to fund and assist research that might present them in a bad light. They would rather have researchers respond to many 'how to' questions related to day-to-day operations with concrete tools, approaches, and solutions. We suggested that only boundary work could help mediate such a contradiction. If researchers demanded complete freedom to criticize anything and everything at will, the police would step out. If the police demanded academics to surrender their independence and critical stance, researchers would lose interest.

We used the multi-context model throughout the conference when concrete projects and issues were discussed to reflect together on 1) contradictions between the contexts, 2) what makes them productive or not, 3) when it is worth the effort. What people often said in private, about the stuff ‘under the surface’, could now more easily be shared in the room – frequently leading to bouts of laughter. It allowed people to explore what constitutes boundary work. One person labelled it as a process of give and take based on ongoing interaction rather than a one-time transaction, thus problematizing the notion of supply and demand. This framework allowed the participants to see that boundary work instead requires ‘clumsy solutions’ that are agreed upon incrementally based on different ideas and reasons for each party (Rayner, 2012). They also recognized that the intention of research having ‘fast, more, and deep’ impact (as stated in the strategic agenda) would not be realistic, at least not all at the same time. Where impact needs to be deep, boundary work needs to be slow to make the best of both worlds, requiring participative methods of research. This led to discussions about which issues warrant such deep inquiry. Some posited that deep inquiry is called for when research focuses on police craft rather than police policies, and is best done during police work instead of through evaluations afterwards. The conference did not produce bold new decisions, but it did legitimize persistent tensions and enabled learning conversations about boundary work.

### ***Thinking through research designs in teaching and practice***

Another application of the multi-context model is to discuss how to fit action research to specific situations. We have found this helpful in teaching students or aiding colleagues to design their research, and also in thinking through our own research designs with close collaborators. For this purpose, we often pose three questions. Firstly, we consider which boundary region has the most generative potential considering the issue and situation at hand. As argued above, action research does not benefit from evenly ‘integrating’ all four contexts, but by focussing efforts where depth of inquiry pays off. It is a way to combine Smith and Lewis’s (2011) low-intensity tactic of ‘situated choice’ (focussing on specific areas or contexts) with the high-intensity tactic of ‘creating integration’ (engaging in sophisticated boundary work in the selected area). The first tactic frees up the time and energy to use the second tactic. Secondly, we consider who can best mediate the contradictions in the selected area, especially to what extent boundary crossing is primarily done by the action researcher (commuting strategy) or with those most involved (intertwining strategy). Thirdly, we consider how ‘supportive input’ from another context may enable generative boundary work. Countervailing change dynamics often emerge, such as certain voices dominating, covering up tensions, or laying blame, and resorting to habitual expectations. Methods or skills from another context can make a difference – think of dialogue facilitation (input from context III) or research methods (input from context IV).

An example concerns the transformation of the whole ‘Youth Care’ system in the Netherlands in 2015 when it was decentralized, shifting responsibility for programs from the national to the municipal level. Youth Care includes a range of services for children and their support systems (parents, schools, neighbourhood) aimed at helping children grow up well and find their way in society. As part of this decentralization, a change towards multidisciplinary, neighbourhood-level teams was meant to enable local decision making,

allowing problems to be dealt with faster while empowering those involved and reducing costs. The boards of the 21 institutions involved in this new arrangement in the Amsterdam region felt a need to monitor whether these intentions materialized, asking: What was the lived reality of the desired transformation? And what could they do to support improvement? With regard to the first question, this brings the boundary area in focus between those workers trying to work in a new way (context I) and those creating the organizational conditions (context II). We suggested to the board members that action research helps to intensify the interchange at this boundary, and the institutions agreed. In Figure 2 this is visualized as a thick arrow going back and forth in the boundary area between contexts I and II.

With regard to the third question, we selected research methods (context IV) to ensure sufficient rigor in selecting and interpreting concrete examples of how kids, their support systems, and the neighbourhood-level teams cooperated. We conceptualized the findings, discussed them with the governors' collective, and published them in a national journal for wider dissemination (Vermaak & Engbers, 2016). Incorporating research methods seemed opportune, as little had been done to generate knowledge about how the decentralization of Youth Care had progressed. The thin grey arrows in Figure 2 represent the supportive input going to the boundary area and the knowledge output returning back to context IV.

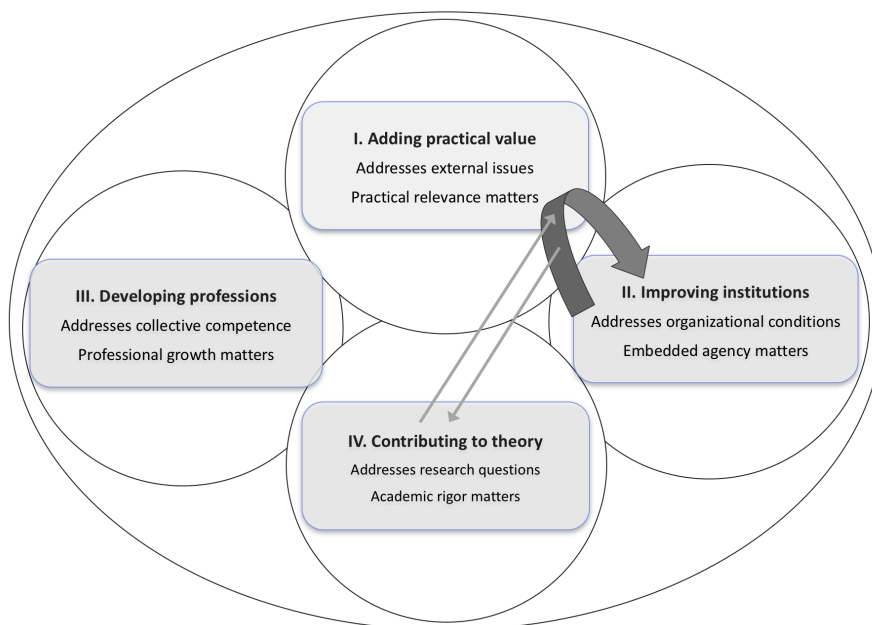


Figure 2. Thinking through research choices to aid Youth Care transformation

In terms of research participation (the second question), the intertwining strategy was used to its full extent with a prominent board member acting as co-researcher: she commuted between the contexts for the benefit of the others who had more limited roles to play. These were concerned workers who participated in interpreting their own cases (at the edge of context I) and other board members who participated in reflecting on the findings (at the edge of context IV), but neither ventured all that far outside their own context. This choice was born out of a need to produce valid conclusions quickly, which is easier with a small inner group that has the ability and commitment to do the hard work. Also, in a period where much

was at stake, the political nature of decision-making could be at odds with an open inquiry that could call existing policies and practices into question. Thus it seemed prudent to not hamper the boundary work by involving too many organizational leaders in it, but instead to allow most of them to react to the findings rather than co-create them.

### **Paying skilful attention to boundary work**

A third application of the multi-context model is applying and studying the skills that are effective in working through contradictions. The devil is in the details: deep change results from accumulating small wins in micro-situations (Vermaak, 2013). The starting point is the felt difficulty of the actors involved, who acknowledge tensions between different contexts and are puzzled about effective courses of action. When they engage action researchers, they opt to inquire into such tensions and explore responses to them. One way to do this is through a hermeneutical-developmental process in which they are guided to intuitively grasp the salient features of ambiguous situations and to find a way out of the difficulties that serves the common good (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). In this case, this process consisted of reflexive conversations with all involved, first to appreciate the nature of the tensions, then to better understand the current defensive dynamic, and finally to take steps towards constructive ways to deal with the tensions (Schuiling, 2014).

A small firm in crisis in 2016 serves as example. The employees and managers are polarized in two camps, holding on to negative perceptions of each other. Employees judge the interim director and interim controller as incompetent and unable to listen, and have voiced this to the supervisory board. The two interim managers in turn feel employees need to respond to their instructions and give them insight in their work. The legitimate concerns of both contexts become obscured in the process: employees fail to recognize how management tries to improve efficiency and innovation (context II), while management fails to recognize how the employees' self-organized activities (context I) kept the company running during the prolonged illness and deathbed of the former director and controller's illness during and after his wife's deathbed. Standard tension between two contexts is not extraordinary (see Table 2) but in this case nobody effectively engages in boundary work. The boundary region is filled with trenches in which every action by one side is experienced as an attack by the other. Members of the supervisory board and the shareholders' board are the first to take up a boundary role by having conversations not only with management but also with employees. They are startled by the vehemence of the emotions and ask us as consultants to mediate.

Instead of patching up relationships between the employees and the interim managers who are bound to leave shortly, we suggest they work to create an understanding of what keeps going wrong in the boundary area between the groups. This may prevent future management to be pulled into the existing dynamic and give them a chance to succeed. In the first round we explore the tensions with each party separately as tempers were too heated to do otherwise. We guided conversations toward understanding the polarizing dynamic between the two, set in a larger configuration consisting also of difficult relationships between the two boards and new developments in the market. We observed there was no event about which the parties told the same story. We suggested that being a director in that configuration had proven to be a difficult job, and asked both groups: what could help a new

director to be more successful? We shared emerging insights from these conversations amongst the parties: we thus enacted a commuting strategy between the two contexts. This seemed sufficient for employees to acknowledge that making their work ‘invisible’ would obstruct new management from succeeding; their willingness to describe workflows and competences grew.

In a second round we introduced the concept of ‘organizational neglect’ into the reflexive conversations to deepen the understanding of the present dynamic. The concept explains non-responsiveness in organizations as a result of *laissez-faire* by management: it is a pedagogical frame of emotional neglect of children by parents used here as a metaphor for organizational life (Kampen, 2015). The concept can be regarded as supportive input from the academic world (context IV). The frame resonated with all involved: employees had felt lost when both their former director and controller fell ill (‘the trusted parents’) and a first interim-director (‘the guardian’) they trusted was pushed out without consultation. They felt driven into the arms of a second interim director (‘the custodian’) and those of an interim controller (‘the warden’) they could not accept and who in turn felt rejected. This realization helped people see it was time to start ‘putting their house in order again’; they started to agree that basic maintenance was due in many areas, not only in coping emotionally with their losses but also in improving product development and competence development, as well as in facilities and governance structure. However, they still differed markedly in which solutions they deemed best to achieve this.

Given the convergence of both their understanding of the past and their agenda for the future, we felt the time was ripe to move beyond separate conversations to collective settings with all sides present: only that would allow them to explore common solutions. To take this step we felt other people than us should start taking up boundary roles. We sensed the former controller (‘the trusted parent’) would be one of the few people who could pull that off, though he was on sick leave and in negotiations for leaving the company permanently. He still had the employees’ trust and members of both boards were willing to support him, though some board members were apprehensive he might be embittered. The interim director and the former controller had battled before, saying that ‘if he stays, I go’. When we reflected on this with the controller, he remarked ‘this is why we get stuck’. Realizing this, he reported back to work two days later to replace the interim controller: he wanted to be part of a new start.

We prepared the first plenary meeting with all involved. The chairman of the supervisory board led the meeting and we kicked off by reiterating the diagnosis and recommendations that had resonated in separate conversations. That sufficed to reach agreement within an hour on a collective agenda to move forward. Before we could embark on that road, there was still some relational work to be done. The interim director had thus far been silent and left alone during the meeting. We shared that observation and suggested somebody should speak to that. The returned controller stepped in, acknowledging the interim director as somebody he always appreciated but who had been handed an impossible task: the wrong role at the wrong moment. The controller thus took up a much needed boundary role that helped people to acknowledge each other’s struggles. It allowed employees to move beyond their harnessed anger towards management, board members to move beyond their apprehension about the controller, and the interim director to move

beyond his frustration about having been ineffective. The atmosphere relaxed and people allowed themselves to be moved both by the controller's words and the possibility of moving forward.

## **Conclusion**

This paper introduced a meta-perspective on action research as taking place within and across different contexts that have different logics and actors. The multi-context model does not prescribe how one should connect action and research, but does help practitioners to reflect on what makes such connections difficult and how to make them work. Such reflection aids those involved to increase their shared understanding and use of action research. This makes sense given that successful action research demands collaborative exploration. It implies that sharing is meaningful with those most involved, but less so with participants who have no interest in the methodological aspects of action research.

The model has been helpful to bridge different worlds. Having said that, a word of caution seems warranted as any such model may also reinforce boundaries (Oswick & Robertson, 2009). We have noticed on occasion that introduction to the model makes people aware of other contexts but only up to a point. It is hard to fully comprehend other contexts when one has limited experience, and even more difficult not to interpret the model from the context that one is most familiar with. It points to the issue of incommensurability (e.g. Scherer & Dowling, 1995): it is impossible to talk about the four contexts in a context-free way, to be an objective observer with a bird's-eye view.

There is no one best way of doing action research, and therefore the design of any action research project must be situated. The multi-context model points to some design choices based on what most benefits the issue at hand, while being mindful of the capacities of those involved. To further discussions about the methodology of action research, we find it makes sense to assess the contributions made by action research projects in connection to such design choices. Related to this point we have found the model helpful as a lens through which to better understand the diversity of action research methods and to distinguish the different boundary roles employed. The term 'scholar-practitioner' surely needs to be unpacked to know to which 'practice' it refers: the practice of managers, workers, or educators? When we focus on boundary work – such as making it easier to add practical value by institutional improvement or furthering the ability to add practical value by professional development – subspecies come to mind, such as 'managing practitioners' or 'practice-based educators'.

We have seen how the model can create a common language, legitimize tensions, and aid in research design. It helps create the conditions for good action research, but has its limits beyond that. Real impact comes from mediating the contradictions to generate new insights in real-life situations, requiring skill, stamina, and passion from all those involved. The real magic happens on a micro-level; the model helps sets the stage for it.



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