

Action Partnership Research Design: A new research methodology

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Abstract. Despite suggestions within LIS literature that users are active stakeholders in research, particularly in such areas as participatory design, examination of the findings indicates that this is not always the case. This is likely the result of methodologies that differentiate contributions from researchers and participants, often creating hidden hierarchies and divisions between the researcher and the researched. In doing so, these methodologies objectify the stakeholder, rather than valuing their input and expertise. Building upon the participatory qualitative research design methodology, Bonded Design, and inspired by indigenous and decolonial methodologies, a new non-hierarchical research methodology, Action Partnership Research Design, is proposed.

Keywords: Action Partner Research Design, Qualitative Research, Participatory Research

1 Introduction

Although the LIS literature applauds the rise of user-focused research (e.g. Bawden, 2006; Dalrymple, 2001; Dora & Kumar, 2020; González-Teruel & Abad-García, 2007; Hewins, 1990; Julien & Duggan, 1996; Nessel & Large, 2004; Powell, 1999; Talja & Hartel, 2007; Wilson, 1994), in reality, the users often perform passive roles, becoming subjects of the research instead of active participants. Moreover, when users do take on active roles, it is often only in specific stages of the research, not the entire process. To address these challenges, this paper argues for the need for another conceptual and methodological research approach, termed, Action Partnership Research Design (APRD). APRD has the potential to contribute to the evolution of user-centered research by confronting unequal power dynamics and unnecessary hierarchies, thus

producing impactful research that values and utilizes actual user expertise and experience. Hence, APRD redefines research based on partnerships, rather than participation alone.

1.1 Literature Review

APRD responds to the continuing isolation of the user within LIS and other qualitative research (Augusto et al., 2018; Clarke, 2018; J. Luca & Ulyannikova, 2020; Julien et al., 2018). It recognizes and attempts to destabilize the power structures inherent in research (Sabati, 2019). Taking its cue from indigenous studies (Evans et al., 2009) as well as decolonization studies (Acevedo-Gil, 2019), APRD focuses on the “self-determination” (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 6) with which various researchers work (Evans et al., 2009).

As an evolution of the Bonded Design (BD) methodology, APRD fuses elements of participatory design (PD) and participatory action research (PAR) to shift the power dynamics within LIS research, to bridge the divide between user research and the design of practical/beneficial services and systems, and to build new understandings of human information behaviors and human interactions with information technology and services. Like Bonded Design, it places the users at the center of the research (Large, et al., 2006, 2007; Large & Nettet, 2009; Nettet & Bible, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Nettet et al., 2021). However, APRD takes this approach further through its recognition and appreciation of users not as simply “the researched” but rather as full research partners within the design team.

To achieve true research partnership within the design team, in addition to PD and PAR, the APRD methodology draws from methodologies and theories from indigenous studies (Chilisa, 2012; Evans et al., 2009; Martin, 2003; Nicholls, 2009; Rigney, 1999; Vásquez-Fernández et al, 2018) and decolonization research (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Blume & Roylance, 2020; Schellnack-Kelly, 2020; Sabati, 2019; Springgay & Truman, 2019; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Tuhiwai, 2012). Generally, these methodologies use participatory approaches while also challenging dominant power structures, such as those of the academy. While work applying indigenous methodologies and addressing decolonial perspectives is arguably both more inclusive and more cognizant of the power structures within academia that often exclude the user, unfortunately, such research is still often niche.

2 Action Partnership Research Design (APRD)

Action Partnership Research Design (APRD) is an advancement of the Bonded Design (BD) methodology as employed in a higher education environment. Unlike in the original intergenerational teams that informed the creation of the Bonded Design methodology (Large & Nettet, 2009; Large, et al, 2006, 2007), in the subsequent BD studies (Nettet & Bible, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Nettet, Bible, & Vanderschantz, 2020; Nettet et al., 2021) participatory design techniques were used to bring two disparate groups (university faculty and IT professional staff) together in design teams to achieve two goals: the first to encourage and enable meaningful communication and collaboration between

these two groups that rarely if ever interacted, the second to develop recommendations for modifications to three university technologies (email, learning management system, storage system) in an effort to make them more faculty-friendly to use. Findings indicated that these two groups acted as partners not only within their two groups, but also with the researchers who, although acting as facilitators of the design techniques, learned alongside as they all engaged in the two tenets of participatory design: learning by doing, and mutual learning (Carmel, et al., 1993; Muller & Kuhn, 1993; Schuler & Namioka, 1993). It was this finding that acted as the catalyst for developing a new methodology that would further recognize the contributions of the participants' expertise in solving a problem and in doing so, eliminate the hierarchy between researcher and researched. Thus, Action Partnership Research Design (APRD) while it uses the same design techniques as Bonded Design (prototyping, brainstorming/ideating, discussion, evaluation, consensus-building) deemphasizes the often-authoritative role of the researcher to that of a co-learner and partner. The design team for APRD consists of research partners who provide individual, unique expertise to collaborate to meet a common goal. In this way, they embody the assertion of Bowler et al. (2008) that participatory design, "[recognizes] that users are the experts . . . in the real world and that they should, therefore, be part of the design process . . . 'in essence co-designers' throughout an iterative, circular process of design" (p. 734). As evidenced in the literature, however, in many PD approaches, the extent to which users are considered equal to the researchers/designers, especially in terms of decision-making, is not readily apparent (Large, et al. 2006b; Nessel & Bible, 2018a)). In contrast, the APRD methodology, through its emphasis on the importance of the expertise and experience of all design team members seeks to make explicit equality within all aspects of the design process, promoting partnership, not just participation.

In its emphasis on partnership, APRD challenges the traditional hierarchy of LIS, and other academic research partnering researchers with community partners to develop strong channels of communication and collaboration. Key to APRD is community involvement: community partners are included in every aspect of the research, from the identification of the problem or needs assessment to the data analysis/presentation of data. Taking its cue from indigenous studies (Evans et al., 2009) as well as decolonization studies (Acevedo-Gil, 2019), APRD focuses on the "self-determination" within the community (Evans et al., 2009; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021, p. 6).

It is asserted that APRD, through its emphasis on open communication and communication accomplishes even more than the creation of new knowledge. The design techniques of APRD encourage design team members to think beyond the confines and limitations of the present into the future to ideate abstract and innovative concepts. In its non-hierarchical structure, APRD also embodies the morals and ethics as agreed upon by all team members. It is for these reasons that the APRD methodology can lead to the attainment of the highest and least defined level of the Data-Information Knowledge-Wisdom (DIKW) pyramid, namely, wisdom (Ackoff, 1989; Awad & Ghaziri, 2004; Rowley, 2007).

2.1 APRD and the Community

The premise of APRD is that for success, from the very beginning to the end a project should be based upon community needs and values. While in BD the needs assessment, a survey of a wider community developed by the researchers, not only serves as the catalyst for the design sessions but also informs their content (Nesset & Bible, 2018a, 2018b) in APRD the needs assessment is created by all design team members, researchers and community partners alike, based on a commonly defined goal built by consensus. Therefore, the research will better reflect the actual values of the community, rather than those perceived and enforced by the researchers, something for which the research on indigenous populations has argued (Rigney, 1999; Martin, 2003; Smith, 2012; Vásquez-Fernández, 2018).

To be effective, the APRD methodology cannot be immediately implemented in unfamiliar community settings. As research on indigenous methodologies has suggested, researchers must establish bonds of trust with community members (Catania, 2019; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis, 2015; Goodman et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2005; Lavallée, 2009; Lilley, 2018; Vásquez-Fernández, 2018). The researchers must either have or establish relationships with potential community partners before the actual research may take place. A mutual trust between researchers and community partners is required to realize the full potential of the APRD methodology as design team members collaboratively work together to identify and solve problems. Depending on the project, this building of mutual trust between researchers and community partners may take weeks, months, or even years. Furthermore, some researchers may be reluctant to accept less-educated community members' expertise as equal to their own. This reluctance is reminiscent of the earlier iterations of participatory design where designers sometimes found it difficult to accept as valid the expertise of users (Carmel, et al., 1993; Muller & Kuhn, 1993; Schuler & Namioka, 1993).

Another key aspect to destabilizing the power hierarchy through APRD is the use of creativity. APRD actively uses mental modeling throughout the process. Mental model theory focuses on relationships within a system, particularly how the user envisions them to be (Borgman, 1986, Greene & Azevedo, 2009; Richardson et al., 1994). Other research has expanded the use of mental models past systems to focus on reasoning and logic (Albrecht & O'Brien, 1993; Haig et al., 2006; Kolkman et al., 2005; Markovits & Barrouillet, 2002; Radvansky et al., 1993) A mental model influenced the idea of low-tech prototyping in BD, where research participants drew what they valued (Large, et al., 2006a, 2006b; Large & Nesset, 2009; Nesset & Bible, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Nesset et al., 2021). However, unlike Bonded Design where there is implicit technological involvement whether in the process, the deliverable, or both (Large, et al., 2006a, 2006b; Large & Nesset, 2009; Nesset & Bible, 2018a, 2018b, 2019), APRD does not have such expectations. Thus, the technique of low-tech prototyping can be changed to mental modeling as appropriate.

As APRD builds upon the BD methodology and relies on established relationships based on trust between participants, it is best employed in a face-to-face setting. How-

ever, as evidenced by the success of transitioning the BD methodology into a completely virtual environment (Nesset, et al., 2021) due to the COVID-19 pandemic, indications are that APRD can also be effectively deployed online.

2.2 The Tenets of APRD

It is asserted that APRD is qualitative research in one of its purest forms. Everything comes from the emergent data, reflecting the research partners, rather than the objectives of the researcher influencing the data sets. Thus, APRD is not focused on what Clarke (2018) calls “informed design (such as user studies), research about design (such as the history of a design field), or intervention-based action research methodologies” (p. 257). Indigenous research methodology has advocated for a similar approach (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Evan et al., 2009; Martin, 2003; Nicholls, 2009; Vásquez-Fernández et al., 2018).

In promoting meaningful communication and collaboration between disparate groups where everyone’s expertise is recognized and celebrated, APRD seeks to keep these community partners involved throughout the entire process, including data analysis and presentation. Rather than the researchers standing apart from the community members to analyze the data, or presenting this analysis to the group, APRD includes community members within the analysis process by using the design techniques to promote reflection and discussion. As research on indigenous communities has demonstrated (Martin, 2003; Sundberg, 2015; Vásquez-Fernández et al., 2018), this helps ensure that the goals, decision-making, and presentation of data do not rest solely with the researchers but in partnership with the communities.

By focusing on communication, APRD redefines the idea of success and outcome. As APRD promotes equality and non-hierarchical relationships, researchers must be aware that sometimes success cannot be empirically measured or may not appear as expected. Ideally, the design team will come up with a definition of what “success” looks like for the specific context. If this is not possible, just having two disparate groups (usually researchers and community members) meeting and communicating in the same space can equal success. Viewed in this way, whether the design team members solve a problem, work well together, or continue the study is not the main purpose. Of course, the challenge will be in convincing the academic community that this is an acceptable research outcome.

3 Conclusion

In its recognition that everyone has expertise to share, Action Partnership Research Design represents an equitable, diverse, and inclusive methodology. While it is based on participatory design models, specifically that of Bonded Design, it is informed by indigenous and decolonization methodologies that place the needs of partners in research first. APRD is unique in that it explicitly recognizes that everyone has expertise to share, uses techniques that facilitate and enable this sharing, and by doing so actively encourages active partnership between researchers and community members in all

stages of an iterative process designed to facilitate the identification and solving of problems. As such, the APRD methodology can be used in a variety of contexts, whether in research or practice.

4 References

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