

# ALAR

*Action learning and action research journal*



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*ALARA is a strategic network of people interested or involved in using action learning or action research to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses.*

*ALARA's vision is that action learning and action research will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society.*

# **ALAR Journal**

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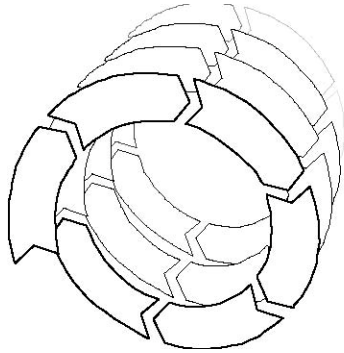
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## Editorial

As the season turns to Autumn, I welcome you to a somewhat reflective edition, our April edition of *ALARj*, as the pages of ALARA also turn into the future.

In this edition, we wrap up our 2007 ALARA conference peer reviewed papers, with articles by Dillon and Hill on the notion of 'Reconnaissance' and the doctoral experiences of action researchers, and by Hendrick who explores the relationship between Action Research and 'Place Management'. It has been an enjoyable revisitation of the conference, held in Port Adelaide, while editing this edition; a chance to reflect on the themes, conversations and outcomes of the conference once again. These articles, together with the remaining peer reviewed articles by Lindeman, Horner and Stringer, and Allen, all put the practitioner at the centre, reflectively speaking.

Lindeman considers the effectiveness of employing an action learning approach to the training and education of child protection workers. Horner and Stringer take up a similar mantle in their discussion of the impact of undertaking an action research project to facilitate organisational change in a community-based aged care facility, where the project involved the senior management team. Allen delves into a process of second-order practitioner reflection, based on her Masters experiences of developing practitioner self-awareness.

Keep your eye on the ALARA website for related conference presentations by Dillon and by conference organiser and

researcher, Janet Kelly. These will be available as PDF slides, which you can access upon logging in as a member.

Our next edition, due in October, will reveal a 'new look' ALARA, complete with redesigned logo! You'll see this soon on the ALARA website, [www.alara.net.au](http://www.alara.net.au), so be sure to take a look. The new look, a new chapter in ALARA's history, coincides with the current and ongoing ALARA visioning process, facilitated by longtime ALARA member and action researcher, Bob Dick. All members are invited to engage in this creative and necessary process to enable ALARA to move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Management Committee records their activity (which also coincides with the visioning process) via an Action Plan, available to members for discussion on the website at [www.alara.net.au/actionplan](http://www.alara.net.au/actionplan).

Now, more than ever, do we, as action researchers and practitioners, need to step up and make some noise about the benefits and the instruments of engagement of action learning and action research, for all in our society.

Margaret O'Connell  
Managing Editor, *ALARj*

# **Reconnaissance as an unconsidered component of action research**

- Paul Dillon, investigator

Action researchers talk about reconnaissance as being a phase of action research. McNiff, Whitehead and Lomax (2003, p.35) describe reconnaissance as those activities that allow a determination for the action researcher of 'where I was at, what I hoped to achieve and how I thought that I would get there'. Ultimately the activities within the reconnaissance phase of action research clarify 'where I was starting from in my real world situation' (McNiff, *et al*, 2003, p.35).

As an action researcher completing doctoral research I found that the concept of reconnaissance needed scaffolding. In developing a framework conceptualising reconnaissance I clarified that reconnaissance could be either an intentional or an unintentional process. I suggested there were two dimensions to reconnaissance:

- self reconnaissance- the exploration of the investigator's beliefs and behaviours within a particular investigation context; and
- situational reconnaissance- the exploration of the particular context.

In this paper I examine one stage of the classic four-stage (plan-act-observe-reflect) action research cycle and focus on the planning phase. Whether in the context of academic research, community enquiry or business investigation the

planning is the logical first step in the research. Within this phase I specifically focus on reconnaissance as a practice within the planning phase of formal doctoral research.

## **The context of my research**

Broadly speaking, any research is related to either the production of new knowledge or the refinement of existing knowledge. The challenge when working with knowledge is that it is never context free (Snowden, 2003). My context was research undertaken within a professional doctorate program. The focus of such a doctoral program is the enhancement of the researcher's professional practice through applied investigation and problem solving rather, than a focus on a contribution to pure research or to theoretical knowledge (Queensland University of Technology, 2005). The professional doctorate draws on Schön's (1983) concept of reflective practitioners, where research can be seen as a route from competence to excellence, through continuous improvement of professional practice.

Investigating within the context of the professional doctorate invited the use of methodologies, such as insider research and self-study. In adopting self-study methodologies it was important for me to explicitly identify, where as a researcher, I was positioned relative to the investigation. Insider research in the form of self-study demonstrated the 'best fitness for function' (Swepson, 2004, p.2) for investigation into my professional practice. Figure 1 is a representation of this positioning relationship compared to other possible options. Acknowledging the relationship between researcher and paradigm was central to successfully working with living theory action research. The acknowledgement enabled me as an investigator to authentically research both myself and my workplace and subsequently generate

meaningful new knowledge valid to myself and to my workplace.

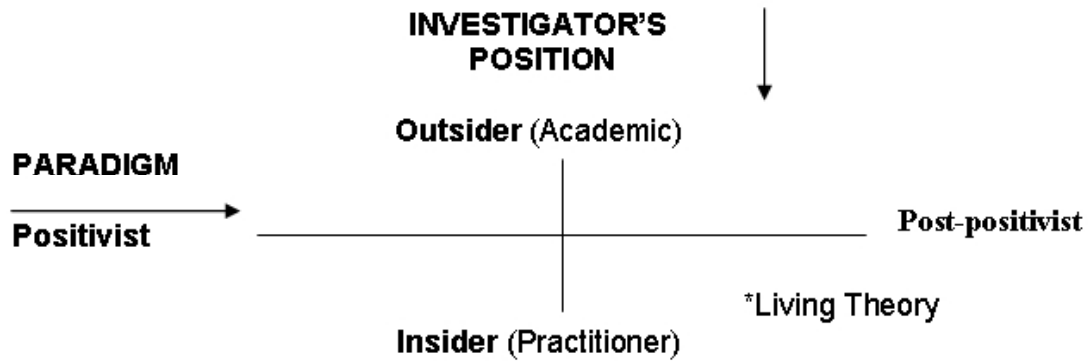


Figure 1. Matrix of research methodologies

## Investigation approach

My doctoral research was a self-study of my professional practice as a school administrator particularly as seen through the framework of knowledge management. The investigation was constructed around my professional practice as a deputy principal in a large P-12 school. To these investigations I brought my worldview of administrative practice as one characterised by ill-defined and messy problems. Such a worldview was at odds with those modern management discourses that continue to articulate a worldview that organisations should be rational systems that operate as efficiently as possible (Mc Niff, 2000). These organisations should function as rational information processing machines (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) where issues and problems are clear and decisive, leading to straightforward analysis.

To research management practices within a complex and messy world, practitioners must engage in more inductive forms of reflection and experimentation (Schön, 1983). In my

investigations I adopted an approach that broadly encompassed the framework for living theory action research suggested by McNiff (2000, p.204) and elaborates the simple iterative cycle of 'planning, acting, observing and reflecting'. She indicated that living theory action research normally consisted of the following stages:

1. review current practice,
2. identify an aspect to improve,
3. imagine a way forward,
4. try it out,
5. take stock of what happens,
6. modify plan in the light of what is found and continue with the action,
7. monitor what is done, and
8. evaluate the modified action.

Such a listing of eight steps suggests an orderly linear investigative process. However McNiff (2000) warns that an inherent danger for those who engage with action research is that they conceptualise it as a neat process following a linear format. The reality is that any plan in action research should be viewed as only a broad plan because sometimes things do not work out neatly and a good deal of creative zigzagging is required to get back on course and sometimes they do not get back on course (McNiff, 2000).

As my understanding of the living theory approach grew I came to acknowledge that it was not just a formulaic approach to undertaking action research but rather 'a lived practice, not something only to be spoken about but also something to be done' (McNiff, 2000, p.199). The principles of living theory action research have now become embedded in my practice.

My investigation had two distinct phases. They were:

- phase one – pre-doctoral confirmation, and
- phase two – post-doctoral confirmation.

Confirmation established a milestone in my research journey and in hindsight I recognised reconnaissance as all that preceded the confirmation. Using McNiff's (2000) 8-stage plan for action research as a review framework, by the completion of my reconnaissance I had clearly:

- undertaken a preliminary review of my practice as an administrator (stage 1),
- identified the management of knowledge as an aspect of my practice to improve (stage 2), and
- tentatively imagined a way forward through using living theory action research (stage 3).

It is this phase of my action research process that I will now elaborate upon.

### **Pre-doctoral confirmation**

It would be a misrepresentation of my actions within this phase of my investigations if I intimated that I had initiated reconnaissance as a predetermined part of my research. As a manager possessing an underlying positivist worldview, there was a natural propensity to run to the planning phase of my investigations and outline a 'battle plan' with which to attack the problem at hand. In this behaviour was the unidentified risk that there were many underlying and significant assumptions that were either not identified or were not challenged. As I progressed through the early phases of my investigation, moving through micro-cycles of planning and reflecting, I became aware of the need to examine both the context of my investigation and me the investigator. Through this period of increasing

enlightenment I came to understand the importance of reconnaissance within the living theory approach to action research. This developing understanding of reconnaissance reflected Whitehead's (2003) argument that a researcher doesn't have to select a chosen research methodology from the start. Rather, it is important for an insider researcher to trust their methodological inventiveness to create their own way through their research. Understanding how to deal with the complexities and vagaries of the situation is at the heart of the action research process.

The reality of my doctoral research was that during phase one there was no official recognition by the university that my investigations had commenced because in doctoral studies confirmation was acknowledged as the juncture point between preparation and research. However within the context of my application of living theory action research significant investigations into my practice had already commenced. I came to conceptualise this phase of my research as reconnaissance as identified by McNiff, *et al* (2003). I acknowledge that there is very little literature about reconnaissance but McNiff, *et al* (2003) suggested that during this phase I had to realistically determine where I was at, what I hoped to achieve and how I thought that I would get there. Reconnaissance during this period was about authentically clarifying the starting point in my 'real world situation' (McNiff, *et al*, 2003, p.35).

I came to recognise that reconnaissance within the pre-doctoral confirmation phase occurred in two distinct time periods. They were:

- the period prior to the commencement of my doctoral, and
- the period after the commencement of my doctoral studies.



The reconnaissance occurring within these two periods was identified as being significantly different. In the period prior to the commencement of my doctoral studies the reconnaissance was unintentional reconnaissance. While in the period after the commencement of my doctoral studies the reconnaissance was intentional. The difference being that the intentional reconnaissance was deliberate and consciously undertaken within my studies whereas the unintentional reconnaissance was only recognised for what it was once my studies had commenced and I became aware of the writings of McNiff, *et al* (2003).

The **unintentional** reconnaissance was vital as it was this reconnaissance that ultimately heightened my interest in the area of research and eventually led me to commence a professional doctorate. Acknowledgement of the significance of unintentional reconnaissance is an acknowledgment that the process of practitioner investigation can encompass more than the activities undertaken during the period of formal academic enrolment and that the investigations undertaken prior to formal research confirmation are of significant value within the overall investigation process.

The **intentional** reconnaissance undertaken in the period immediately prior to my doctoral confirmation provided clarity and direction to my investigations. The investigations undertaken during this period provided me with an understanding of why I sought to research in the broad area of knowledge management and why I selected the professional doctorate as my research vehicle. Ultimately it resulted in me adopting a more critical approach to my investigations.

## **Reconnaissance: the process**

In the context of self study, the 'where I was at' component of reconnaissance, was particularly significant. As a practitioner engaged in critical reflection on their practice it was vital to truly know my starting point if I was to identify any change in my practice. It was vital to my investigations to acknowledge that significant unintentional reconnaissance had occurred in the period prior to my doctoral studies. It was challenging for me to identify where I was at when I commenced my research. It was significant for me to identify that I brought to my doctoral studies a range of beliefs related to my leadership and management practices that reflected my ontology and epistemology at that stage of my life.

Within the broad context of research, where whatever the issue investigated, there will always be the investigator and the issue and individual researchers will investigate the same situation differently. Similarly within the narrower context of reconnaissance there needs to be an exploration of both the investigator and the situation. I have suggested that these two areas of investigation be referred to as:

- self reconnaissance - the exploration of the investigator's beliefs and behaviours within the areas of leadership and management, and
- situational reconnaissance - the exploration of the research context, investigation approaches and the literature related to the management of knowledge.

I used an analysis framework embracing the two reconnaissance time periods and the exploration of self and situation to present my reconnaissance. The development of my awareness of the concept of reconnaissance late in the pre-confirmation phase of my research made the provision of evidence problematic as no evidence sources had been

developed specifically for the purposes of reconnaissance. My reconnaissance was largely a retrospective activity drawing upon a range of artefacts and experiences from the reconnaissance period. From these artefacts I was able to draw evidence to authenticate my statements about my developing thinking that occurred during reconnaissance. I examined each of these events from the perspective of self reconnaissance and situational reconnaissance.

Situated within the reconnaissance phase of this specific research project there were two distinct time periods within which cycles of action occurred. The periods were as follows.

- *The period prior to the commencement of my doctoral studies.* During this period there were a number of experiences within my professional life that acted as catalysts for my interest in exploring the broad research topic and which ultimately led to my applying for a position of Deputy Principal. To support my reflection on the reconnaissance that occurred during this period I have drawn upon one significant artefact from this time, that was, the written application for my current position as Deputy Principal. This artefact provided evidence of my worldviews and professional practice as at that point in time.
- *The period between the commencement of my doctoral studies and my confirmation.* Reconnaissance during this period involved the structured reading, reflection, planning, trialling of ideas and discussion of issues linked to organisational learning and the management of knowledge. It was through exposure to the writings of (McNiff, *et al*, 2003) during this period that I became aware of the concept of reconnaissance as a stage of action research.

## **Pre-commencement of doctoral studies**

A significant outcome of reconnaissance is the clarification of where I was starting from in my action research project (McNiff, *et al*, 2003, p.35). It is my argument that my action research commenced in January 2001 when I commenced my doctoral studies rather than January 2003 when I had completed my doctoral confirmation and formal permission to commence my research was provided by the university. To identify where I was starting from in January 2001 I drew upon artefacts from three specific events related to my professional life. The events were:

- my Master's study,
- a tragic event that occurred at a school where I was teaching, and
- my application for my current position as Deputy Principal.

I examined each of these events from the perspective of self reconnaissance and situational reconnaissance.

## **Post-commencement of doctoral studies**

The commencement of my doctoral studies meant that a very broad situation had been identified for investigation and consequently situational reconnaissance figured prominently as by definition there was a focused exploration of the research context, investigation approaches and related literature. My thinking continued to develop during the reconnaissance period between the commencement of my doctoral studies and the formal confirmation of my research proposal.

A significant aspect of the reconnaissance during the post-commencement phase of my doctoral studies was the review of the literature. During this period the forced reflection

associated with the development of my literature review was one of the major catalysts for changes in my thinking. These changes were evidenced in a range of artefacts produced during the three-year period leading to the development of the formal confirmation document.

### **The impact of reconnaissance**

By the completion of the post-commencement phase, changes had occurred in how I defined the research question and consequently how to research the question. I had moved from acting as an external researcher operating within my workplace, to being an insider researcher critically examining my practice in my workplace. I came to accept the reality that any plan in action research should be viewed as only a broad plan (McNiff, 2000) and as such a researcher doesn't have to select a chosen research methodology from the start (Whitehead, 2003). I had determined that the living theory approach to action research would support the critical investigation of my practice.

By the completion of my cycles of intentional and unintentional reconnaissance I had touched upon all of the outcomes of reconnaissance as defined by McNiff, *et al* (2003). I had determined where I was at both professionally and personally, what I hoped to achieve through my research and how I thought that I would get there. I was committed to using my enrolment in a professional doctorate as a vehicle to critically investigate my professional practice as an administrator. I had determined that I would use a living theory approach to action research to understand the how of my practice.

A significant outcome of reconnaissance is the clarification of where I was starting from in my action research project

(McNiff, *et al*, 2003, p.35). I argue that for a doctoral student employing an action research methodology their research commences upon the commencement of their doctoral studies rather than when they have completed their doctoral confirmation and received formal permission to commence their research from the university.

Reconnaissance allows an investigator to be more aware of where they are at, what they hope to achieve and how they are going to get there. The role of reconnaissance within living theory action research is captured by Michael Leunig (1996) a contemporary Australian satirist in his commentary on the search for personal truth.

*In order to be truthful*

*We must do more than speak the truth.*

*We must also hear truth.*

*We must also receive truth.*

*We must also act upon truth.*

*We must also search for truth.*

*The difficult truth.*

*Within us and around us.*

*We must devote ourselves to truth.*

*Otherwise we are dishonest... (Leunig, 1996)*

## **Glossary of terms**

**Action research** is seen as an essentially self-managed process of collaborative and rigorous enquiry, action and reflection, which through a series of cycles of these activities, can simultaneously improve the situation being addressed and develop the skills and insights of the individuals doing it (Winter, 1996).

**Living theory action research** is a way of doing research that generates a theory for living, through individual researchers asking questions about how to improve their own practice. It involves the tracking of knowledge production and its power effect and the creation of spaces for new dialogue and contestation (McNiff, 2000).

**Reconnaissance** is the starting point of action research where the researcher determines where they are at, what they hope to achieve and how they think that they will get there (McNiff, *et al*, 2003, p.35).

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### **About the author**

Paul Dillon has been a school based educator for 28 years. During this period he has been a classroom teacher, Head of Department, Deputy Principal and is currently Head of Senior School at the Brisbane School of Distance Education. Paul has recently completed his Professional Doctorate with the Queensland University of Technology using living theory action research to undertake a self study of his professional practice with a particular focus on knowledge management and structured reflective practice. He used conversations as his data in this practitioner investigation. Paul would welcome feedback via [pjdillon@bigpond.com](mailto:pjdillon@bigpond.com)



# Engaging practitioners in change of practice: the importance of Reconnaissance

- Geof Hill, investigative  
practitioner

## Catalyst

Two significant events prompted my writing this paper. The first was a response to what I learned from my doctoral student as he used living action research (McNiff, 2000) to undertake practitioner investigation. Paul Dillon graduated with his doctoral degree in 2007. In my supervisory relationship with him I not only mentored his living action research but benefited from reading his theorising of his investigative approach, particularly his exploration into what it meant to undertake reconnaissance in action research. His practice of undertaking living action research led him to theorise about the action research sub practice of 'reconnaissance'.

The second event was enmeshed within my examination of several cohorts of students undertaking school based action research as part of their postgraduate teaching degrees. Their reports, undertaken at Master of Education level, consistently lacked explicit reconnaissance of the classroom situations they were investigating. In several reports the low or nonexistent reconnaissance resulted in inadequate foundation for analysis, which subsequently undermined the authenticity of the nominated intervention and made it

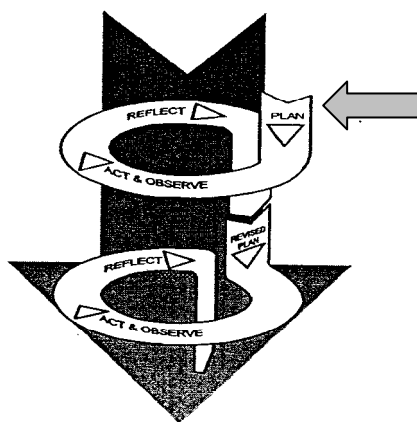
difficult to recognise transparency in a process that suggested that interventions would arise out of an understanding of the situation and literature pertinent to that situation. Both stimulants drew my attention to the importance of reconnaissance in an action research study and prompted me to write about my own practice of reconnaissance in a current practitioner investigation project.

## The ALARA conference theme

This paper is also written in the context of the Annual Nation ALARA Conference, the theme of the 2007 conference being 'Moving Forward Together'. For me, part of the agenda for action researchers to move forward is that they constantly and consistently need to look at their practice. Revisiting 'reconnaissance' is one way I believe that I as an action researcher can 'move forward', and, as the paper explains, the case study described also talks about a group of professionals 'moving forward'.

## Literature on Reconnaissance

The term reconnaissance has a geological or military pedigree and refers to surveying the land to determine a plan of action (Macquarie Dictionary, 1991). It is a word that is derived from the French verb 'reconnaître' - to recognise or to acknowledge importance (Harper, 2001). Kemmis and



McTaggart (1988) used 'reconnaissance' in a research context to describe the beginning or pre-beginning stages of an action research. They drew attention to the need in action research to identify thematic concerns and saw 'reconnaissance' as a reflection of the situation in order to

identify a thematic concern for the action research. Based on their iterative cycle of investigation involving: *Planning, Acting and Observing and Reflecting*. They suggested that 'reconnaissance' preceded the Planning stage.

For them reconnaissance was not only observations but critical reflection as well. It needed to take into account

*the risks involved in social change and recognise the constraints, material and political, in the situation. Secondly critically informed action should be chosen because it allows practitioners to act more effectively over a greater range of circumstances, more wisely and more prudently (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, pp.11-12).*

Based on this description of reconnaissance it is possible to make comparisons to March and Stafford's (1988) "situational analysis" that is undertaken ahead of policy or curriculum changes in educational settings. They describe the situation analysis as a process of analysis of the situation in order to surface the beliefs and ideologies of the stakeholders to that situation. Reconnaissance in addition, places an emphasis on making explicit the observations on which the desire to make the change is based and the literature that is used to make sense of these observations.

Dillon (2007) drew his definition of reconnaissance from McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) and defined it as a process of clarifying the starting point of one's research. Quoting McNiff, *et al* (2003, p. 35), he suggested that reconnaissance allowed him to determine "where I was at, what I hoped to achieve and how I thought I would get there."

In his theorising about the practice of reconnaissance, Dillon's (2007) recognised many events that contributed to

his determination of 'where I was at'. These included key philosophical positions from previous education as well as significant events in his professional life. It led him to theorise that reconnaissance consisted of self and situational reconnaissance.

Under a notion of self-reconnaissance he argued that an investigator needed to consider the baggage that he/she is carrying into the situation. He begged the question as to how far in one's history an investigator needed to go to uncover the personal historical events that are impacting both on the observation of a catalyst situation and on the determination of an appropriate intervention. The nature of this question draws attention to the multiple precursors to our current action. This "language and (these) understandings that shape your action - (may) need changing just as much as the specifics of what you do" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 26). Dillon's (2007) self-reconnaissance also had parallels with Bawden's (1991) notion of the windows through which an investigator is viewing their world. Even Bawden's (1991) term of 'mapping' is resonant with a notion of reconnaissance.

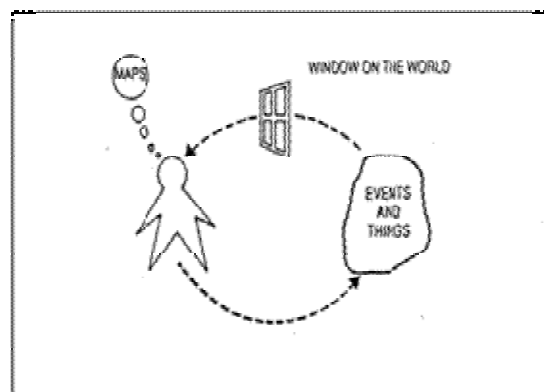


Figure 1. Making sense as 'mapping' (Bawden 1991)

Under a notion of situational reconnaissance he looked at how a situation might be viewed in the light of its

organisational context and the policies that might impact on the current situation, the literature that might provide insights into why the current situation is occurring and the protagonists to the situation. While reconnaissance does not appear to have been discussed at great length in much of the action research literature, the limited references provide a foundation for an important construct within the practice of action research.

## **My own practices of Reconnaissance**

### *Context*

The particular situation to which I am applying my reconsidered reconnaissance is contextualised at a university which has received an Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) evaluation. Among other things, the AUQA report suggested that the teaching staff needed to reflect on and publish more about their pedagogy. I was invited as a consultant to develop professional development interventions to achieve this outcome.

### *Self Reconnaissance*

My project involves helping university academics examine their teaching. This research resonated with a dominant theme in my own professional life of working with both pre-service teachers and qualified teachers helping them to look at their teaching practice. In recent years this has involved me in work with Education Queensland facilitating the introduction of a framework of Productive Pedagogies to primary and secondary school teachers, and, influenced myself by the framework, initiating changes in my own university teaching in the Graduate School of Management at Queensland University of Technology. My most recent projects with Queensland University of Technology have

also explored aspects of pedagogy in the restricted teaching practice of research supervision.

Coincidentally in the early stages of this project I was invited by a colleague from this university to 'cover' for her at a University Scholarship of Teaching Colloquium when she discovered an unexpected clash of commitments. In preparing for my presentation I uncovered several of my experiences that informed my own view of university teaching and these were also relevant for my self reconnaissance for this project.

I acknowledged firstly my own experiences as a university student and how when I was enrolled in an undergraduate education course I noticed that almost all the academic staff had speech impediments. At that time in N.S.W. people with impediments were excluded from teaching in schools and it appeared that many of them had ended up in this course.

I also acknowledged my own first experience of lecturing. When I graduated from the Australian Film and Television School I began lecturing in Communication at Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education. The Small Group course was delivered in a series of large lectures and seminars. As part of the academic team I was rostered to deliver one of the lectures which turned out to be Bales Theory of Group Dynamics. At the same time I was performing Neil Simon's stage play 'Chapter Two' at a local repertory company and drew the comparison that while my stage performance was entertaining to that audience my lecture appeared to me to be boring for many of the students. Both experiences gave me a personal awareness about university teaching and a recognition that university teaching needed to be engaging. It was not sufficient to just present the material to students.

As I continued with my academic career I began to realise that while early childhood, primary and secondary school teachers had between three and four years pre-service education training ahead of engaging on their careers as teachers there was no such parallel with academic teaching. The possession of a doctoral degree, and sometimes not even that appeared to be the prerequisite qualifications for tertiary teaching. Such limited teaching preparation makes sense of the recent raised awareness of inadequate teaching skills in many universities and specifically in the university in which my project was being undertaken.

Since my earliest professional role as a Work Study Analyst I had been engaged in many forms of Change Management. It became the mainstay of my Management Consultancy service that I ran concurrently with several university lecturing appointments. With my exposure to and adoption of action research I changed my style as a Change Manager to one that was more resonant with action research principles and in doing so reinvigorated a Social Justice philosophy that had been laid down in my primary and secondary schooling. I had been unaware of my Social Justice agendas during my formative years but working as a consultant with the Edmund Rice Organisation subsequent to my 'conversion' to action research, I recognised the Social Justice philosophies with which they practised as teachers in Christian Brothers' schools. Such recognition of one's philosophical roots could also be considered a form of philosophical reconnaissance.

A second dominant theme in my change management practices was that I advocated my clients focus on the positive energy of change rather than the negative energy or resistance to change. This was perhaps an adage of "accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative" (Harold Arlen). This view was strongly influenced by my exposure to

Havelock's (1973) model of change management although I am unable to recall when I was first exposed to it. The model advocated working with those people who were in agreement with the proposed change and helping them develop successful outcomes so that this would influence subsequent cohorts of participants.

### **Situational Reconnaissance**

I had been fortunate to work prior to this project with some staff at this university in a Professional Learning Graduate Certificate. These staff were in effect investigating their own teaching practice, implementing changes and investigating those changes. In the light of my bias towards Havelock's (1973) model for change and its suggestion that a key factor in initiating change was the early adopters, meant that I worked initially with those academic staff who had already achieved the sort of change that was being desired by the university. These staff had already undertaken investigations into their teaching practice, as 'early adopters', and I wanted to examine whether their taking these initiatives had been acknowledged and rewarded by the university, thus, according to Havelock (1973), encouraging a new wave of late adopters who were inspired by the accolades that the early adopters received.

In my preparation for the key note address on the scholarship of teaching I established that the term 'scholarship of teaching' was usually accredited to Boyer (1990) and at this university was also being influenced by Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin and Prosser (2000) and their response to Boyer's (1990) constructs of the scholarship of teaching which recommended that academics "collect(ing) and communicate(ing) results of one's own work on teaching and learning within the discipline". This was resonant for me with the Practitioner Investigation movement (McNiff, *et al*, 2003; Anderson and Herr, 1999) with which I had aligned



my own management consultancy since the completion of my doctoral degree in 2000.

I familiarized myself with the AUQA report that had been prepared following the university's audit and identified areas in the report that mirrored comments that had been made to me by senior university staff about the need for academic staff to focus on their pedagogy and communicate the results of their experiments in teaching.

Within my situational reconnaissance there were also observations that in a way were like puzzle pieces that I could recognise individually but could not see where they were positioned in the bigger picture of the situation. One of these was that when I had attended the University's Vice Chancellors Colloquium on Teaching and Learning I observed that Vice Chancellor only attended sessions spasmodically. This raised a dissonant question in my reconnaissance as to whether some of the desired change was more rhetoric than practice. A second observation was based on a comment made by the person who had initiated discussions with me about the change management project. Their situational reconnaissance (although I am not sure they would describe it as such) was that while some academic staff had undertaken profound investigations into their teaching, the bulk of the teaching staff were more recalcitrant. Initially these observations provided what might be insights into the beliefs and values of (at least) some of the stakeholders.

### **Why is Reconnaissance important?**

Following making explicit my own reconnaissance I am left with the question: Why is Reconnaissance Important in Action Research? I have three responses to this question and

a fourth prompted more by the context of this conference than by my particular situation.

Having been involved with action research since the early Action Research colloquia at Griffith University, I can suggest that in its earlier years action research was both unknown and consistently challenged. As I travelled to other countries and discussed action research with colleagues, I found that they described their groups of adherents as 'pockets' rather than a broad 'movement'. Today, in many of the universities with which I work it appears that there is greater acceptance of action research as a viable methodology. This is particularly so in the Education and Management fields in which I predominantly work. However, this broader acceptance of the approach has led to some, in my opinion, less rigorous examples of action research. This is understandable as without explicit scaffolding it often appears that action research is no different than intensely reflecting on practice. The importance of reconnaissance, and of making the reconnaissance explicit, leads to a chance that this will also educate those new to action research to an understanding of one of the many strategies that add to the rigor of an action research report.

Secondly, reconnaissance does help to surface the unconscious values that underpin all practice and all investigative practice. Like Dillon (2007), we can ask, 'how far back do you go?' as a rhetorical question to emphasise the many influences on the way in which we understand situations in current investigations. In the light of Guba and Lincoln's (1982) problematising of the values that an investigator carries into an investigation, reconnaissance is a step towards acknowledging these values and taking them into account. It also begs a second question as to whether the reconnaissance is restricted only to the pre-action research

phases. My own experience of explicit self reconnaissance has led me to believe that at least this part of reconnaissance is like an onion that is slowly peeled back revealing more and more influences on the way in which we view any current situation.

Thirdly, a conscious act of reconnaissance helps an investigator to critically evaluate. In my own case, the efforts to surface the nature of my bias in terms of change management led me to seek out the source for my knowledge of Havelock's Model. This knowledge had been with me so long that other than the title of the model and its intent, I had forgotten the theorising that went with the model. In the search for authenticating the model I also came across the detractors of the Havelock model and so in developing my critical evaluation of the model I am in a better position to question whether it continues to influence me. In many ways this is part of a literature review and the part that helps to identify the points of dissent within the literature about the topic or topics under investigation. It is only as an investigator comes to understand this dissent that he/she can come to position themselves within the literature, and recognition of this positioning assists them in their critical evaluation.

This conference has suggested that in its processes it will provide a strong emphasis on recognising Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing. This is a further reason for Reconnaissance. With my background so ignorant of the specifics of ways of knowing and doing in such particular social and cultural groups, then Covey's (1989) habit, "seek first to understand, then be understood," emphasizes the importance of reconnaissance as a process of understanding those with whom we might initiate change.

Reconnaissance is not always explicitly documented in action research reports; thus, we run the risk of not recognizing it when it happens in action research practice and thus underestimating the level of preparation that precedes an action research.

In addition to these responses to the question of importance of Reconnaissance, writing and presenting this paper has also taken me a step forward in my own understanding of reconnaissance. While I acknowledge that the literature suggests that reconnaissance takes place at a point in time with regard to action research, my own experiences have taught me, in the same way as McNiff (2000) suggests dissonance between descriptions of and practice of action research, that there is also dissonance between descriptions of and practice of reconnaissance, and that specifically it is not restricted to a place in time but continues in an haphazard way throughout the duration of an action research process.

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### **About the author**

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# Action research: bridging 'Management' in 'Place' - Antonia Hendrick

This paper will explore the connections between Place Management and Action Research as twin principles of the Commonwealth's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS). Place Management<sup>1</sup> as a theory or practice model is nebulous yet all levels of government policy embrace it as an approach said to build community and peoples capacity used to address complex issues facing disadvantaged communities. Action Learning and Research, while more extensively known, comprise one element to the Strategy's National Evaluation Framework. Place Management is underpinned by principles of social capital, capacity building and community development, and certainly suggests a civil setting in which to locate Action Research, although vital questions arise around:

- Who drives the processes (top-down or grass roots)?
- What are the effects of time constraints, funding and reporting requirements?
- How does a Place Management model translate into relationships?
- What are some of the contributions Action Research can make?

Examining these connections is important given the ambiguity surrounding this new Australian policy practice model. Communities for Children Sites (as one stream of the

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<sup>1</sup> Place Management as a theory and/or practice model is still in its infancy. The following questions therefore form the basis to my research (a work in progress): What is Place Management theory and practice, how does Place Management inform social policy decisions in Australia, and what can we learn from the use of Place Management?

SFCS) provide examples to illustrate the challenges and possibilities.

## **Place Management theory and practice**

Place Management, as both a theory and practice model, lacks theoretical substance and clear definition raising questions about its utility in policy and practice. If Place Management is concerned with a restructuring of government services, as Communities for Children (C4C) suggests, then it is important to consider *how* the focus on 'Place' and 'Management' is translated into specific structures, processes and systems, like the allocation of resources, accountability, community engagement, sustainability, management, participation, and decision-making. If Place Management is about community participation then focusing upon processes as all encompassing, as opposed to practices that exclude people from process, requires ongoing reflection. There is a suspicion that "there has indeed been a neo-liberal tendency in much community-based and place-based policy in welfare states" (Smyth, Reddel and Jones, 2005, p. 2).

Literature informing a Place Management approach is mostly generated by public servants, from a public relations perspective, and consequently lacks an accompanying critical analysis of its application. Other information is restricted to the growing number of initiatives engaged in pursuit of Place Management which name area or place based management as an approach yet provide little detail on what constitutes 'Place Management' as a model of practice, much less its theoretical heritage. There appears to be agreement, at least, that there is no single, concise or neat definition of Place Management (Steuart, 2003, p.1; Walsh, 2001, p.4) which is a concept "as elusive as it is evocative" (Stewart-Weeks, 2004, p.2) and significantly a concept in search and need of a definition so as to understand its



potential value and impact. Given this, I concur with Ron Faris (2004, p. 34) that “there are social-historical, ecological, cultural and political economic dimensions to the evolving concept of place management worthy of further investigation”.

## **Place Management programs in Australia**

Given that many Place Management projects are in their infancy, evaluation findings are sparse making it difficult to inform current applications. Across Australia, Queensland and New South Wales currently lead in applying Place Management approaches with evaluation of the Moree Place Management Project (Boyce 2000) and Kings Cross Place Management Scheme providing broad conceptualisations of “innovative ways of working to address problems” while further raising concerns voiced by community agencies evaluated in the area (Randolph 1999, p. 5). The Moree Project offers this definition:

*Place Management is the achievement of positive results in a community, coordinating and acting as a catalyst and conduit, to focus government and private organisations to effect improvements in social, cultural and economic conditions for the people in that place generally and the disadvantaged in particular (Boyce, 2000, p. 2) [emphasis added].*

Implicit in this definition is a top down, ‘outside in’ approach rather than one characterising developmental practice.

## **‘Management’ in Place**

‘Management’ as its meaning implies refers to a centre of control that, in this instance, lies with the Facilitating Partner<sup>2</sup> (FP), or Place Manager. Considering the drivers of processes provides vital clues through which to gauge

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘Facilitating Partner’, as central to the C4C project, is detailed further below.

notions of community ownership, locally driven and owned solutions. Difficulties arise, for example, when non-government organisations (NGOs) are in competition against one another vying for funding. Additional complexity occurs when the FP, previously in partnership with organisations, suddenly sees itself at odds with sister agencies because of the bestowed power. Critiques suggest Place Management is merely “a popular mechanism with government in marrying community capacity building with social planning” (Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon, 2003, p. 2) with the term Place Management considered synonymously with Local Government (Lee and Herborn, 2003, p. 27). Place Management, at times likened to community development models (Green and Zappala, 2000), has also been charged with masking neo-liberalism rather than genuine attempts at involving community in problem defining and solving.

C4C, as a place-based initiative, appears to be a social planning (top-down) approach with little input from those community members at the grass roots, so when considering Place Management as a model with value, what is it that is valued? What are the developmental features of Place Management, given the C4C experience detailed further below, that aid in our understanding of its application as a policy practice model? It is to the influence of Action Learning and Research to which we now turn.

### **Place Management meeting Action Research**

Action Research models, contrary to Place Management models, are clearer and better known, yet share in their ability to be applied to diverse contexts. Action Research belongs to a wider Action Research family with different approaches and practices often deriving from different philosophical, political, psychological, and ecological orientations. Essentially, however, Action Research (as

cooperative and participatory inquiry) is about 'along together' rather than 'to do for' (Heron and Reason, 2001, p. 179). This is a process of people looking *together*, identifying a problem or issue *together*, and working upon agreed processes of action *together* on what was identified: with everyone *together* involved in the design and management of the inquiry (*ibid*). I take the view that within the Action Research tradition no one approach is 'better' but rather its various strands serve various settings more naturally than others.

Reason, *et al* (2001, preface), among other writers, assert the essential dimensions of Action Research include first, any knowledge creation (human capital); second, the encouragement of knowledge creation outside institutional monopolies such as universities and research centres; and third, the encouragement of participation from people who hold a stake in the inquiry. Further finite elements identified by Stringer (1996, p. 15) include, "consensual and participatory procedures that enable people (a) to investigate systematically their problems and issues, (b) to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations, and (c) to devise plans to deal with the problems at hand". Here, clearly Action Research is principled upon empowerment of people in a consciousness-raising exercise involving all participants from the beginning issue definition through to action on reflection and reflection on action. This approach opposes top down processes where stakeholder groups are done *to* rather than done *with*.

Growing national and international debate about civil society, social capital and the increased focus on the social dimension of our lives gives Place Management its wider recognition (Stewart-Weeks, 2000, p. 3). Action Research, with a longer tradition, is also increasingly accepted across disciplines and fields of practice for its participatory nature and ability to adapt to various policy settings. Both

considerations share in theories of social change where engagement in action leads to change. The degree of participation and reflection is that which appears, however, to separate Place Management from Action Research. Here, Action Research assists with the vital component of informing practice through participant involvement whereby “a set of interrelated theories of action for dealing with problems typical to practice situations involves the constructing and testing of theories in practice by the actors” (Friedman, 2001, p. 161). A theoretical construction of Place Management involves actors to less a degree than that of Action Research, where people involved are generally limited to NGOs and those ‘clients’ within its reach.

The policy and popular desire for the creation (or ‘re-creation’) of safe, trusting, civil and sustainable communities by way of a ‘whole of community’ approach, (using early intervention through cross-sectoral collaboration) is clearly finding essence in concepts of Place Management. This interest is “caused primarily by the impact of globalisation on labour markets, transitions in household and demographic structures and shifts in welfare state and public policy” (Walsh, 2001, p.4). In an increasingly complex and fragmented world “Industrial Age Institutions” (Senge and Scharmer, 2001, p. 238), face challenges that are not able, in isolation of other institutions, to effect great social change. Senge and Scharmer further states, “competition, which fuelled the industrial era, must now be tempered by co-operation” (*ibid*). Increasingly, Individual departments’ are encouraged toward the popular maxim of ‘joined up solutions’ to ‘joined up problems’ in which a forging of ‘partnerships’ is established between community, business, non-government and government in ‘new’ governance, network or partnered arrangements.

Across Australia, at all levels of government, ‘community renewal’, ‘social exclusion/inclusion’ and ‘regeneration’

projects with a focus on place have exploded over the past decade. These projects are as diverse as are their theoretical formulations and targets for prevention. In any policy or practice consideration of place-based practices, how communities define themselves (by 'insiders') and how communities are defined (by 'outsiders'), remains central to understanding and developing ways forward alongside people of 'place' together. Policies aiming at locally defined solutions to locally defined problems need policy formulation to include people in place rather than defining problems and solutions from a disconnected place. This is not to dismiss the role of social planning policies, often successfully used by governments, but rather point to poorly designed policies that risk posing as inclusive developmental projects.

These policy climate sentiments find expression in an Australian Federal Government policy, the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS and the 'Strategy' are used interchangeably), to which we now turn.

### **Australia's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

The Howard Government delivered the SFCS in April 2000 declaring it a radically new policy direction targeting prevention and early intervention. John Howard proclaimed the Strategy as "a sound investment in Australia's future by strengthening families and communities" ... "with particularly benefits for families at risk" (Australian Government 2000, John Howard's *forward*). Characterising this 'new direction' is work the Government aims to do 'with' communities rather than "impose one-size-fits-all solutions" (*ibid*).

With five programs funded under the first stage of SFCS (2000-2004), four streams are present in stage two, SFCS

(2004-2009). Earlier learnings, from stage one, assisted development of the subsequent stage, which was further informed by the establishment of a National Agenda for Early Childhood (FaCS, 2005). Principles listed of this later phase of the Strategy include:

- working together in partnerships;
- encouraging a preventative and early intervention approach;
- supporting people through life transitions;
- developing better integrated and coordinated services;
- developing local solutions to local problems;
- building capacity;
- using the evidence and looking to the future; and
- making the investment count (Taylor, 2006, p. 3).

#### **C4C: a Place Management model**

Communities for Children (C4C) represents one of the four SFCS streams and is considered as the most radical change in policy direction for the Australian Government with a shift in focus from outputs to outcomes (Stewart-Weeks, 1998) and the reallocation of power (Green and Zappala, 2000, p. 3). C4C's place based or 'Place Management' policy orientation is said to improve "the coordination and administration of public, private and community sector activity" (Taylor and Nguyen, 2006, p. 17) through which "local issues, circumstances and characteristics" are 'tailored' to suit particular localities or communities in a 'bottom-up' response (DFaCSIA 2007, p. 4). This is a Government response where, "community engagement and ownership are critical to achieving sustainable outcomes" (Lewis and Taylor, 2005, p. 1).

The key focus of the Government's four-year \$142 million C4C initiative is the early years, the social and emotional

development of children zero to five years, with 45 C4C sites selected across the nation. All sites have a non-government organisation (NGO) or consortium, having successfully tendered, as a 'Facilitating Partner' to lead that chosen site. The Facilitating Partner's (FP) initial responsibility began with the task of establishing a C4C Committee, comprising 'local community representatives', which represents "the key decision-making mechanism for the initiative" (Lewis and Taylor, 2005, p. 1). A Community Action Plan (later called Community Strategic Plan) inaugurated the first task for the newly formed committee to determine community service needs for children 0-5 years in the area. The expected timelines to consult the community and report to Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (DFaCSIA<sup>3</sup>) in phase one, which included the Implementation Plan and Budget Report, was six months from the FP signing the Funding Agreement.

The following stages involved the FP contracting NGOs to provide services as identified in the Community Strategic Plan. With contracts in place the NGOs, termed 'Community Partners' under the C4C model, are required to report to the FP at monthly and quarterly intervals. These reports would, in many instances, first go through the FP's governing organisation for approval before going on to DFaCSIA, which could either agree with the plan or return it for amendments, leading to potential delays. In a highly complex web of operations and cross-sectorial relationships, many important questions are present concerning governance, committee membership and outcomes that remain problematic. For example, what are appropriate processes of governance of committee membership, their voting rights, in light of governments' seemingly separated role from the process? What are the likely consequences for

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<sup>3</sup> Now known as the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

conflict of interest for Community Partners' on committees, and what other process considerations are further required?

The first seven pilot sites<sup>4</sup>, said to have been 'hand picked' by Government, witnessed at least one of those organisations new to the 'community' selected with no previous history or relationship to that region. A set of indicators informed the selection of the remaining thirty-eight sites. These included ratings against the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA); Australian Bureau of Statistics social, economic and demographic indicators; local data including the number of young children, number of families receiving Family Tax Benefits, unemployment rates, and levels of income (DFaCSIA 2007, p. 1). Further considerations were based upon consultations with state and territory governments and upon existing levels of capacity identified within the community, such as, community infrastructure, services and networks (DFaCSIA 2007, p. 3). Disadvantage and need identified outside of these communities by experts raises questions about top down processes to effect change at a local level. In this way, C4C aligns more with a social planning policy approach than a developmental one. Tim Muirhead's adaptation of Tony Kelly's Developmental approach lists components of social program planning which include:

- a focus on program
- initiated and driven by outsiders
- grand plan considerations
- starts from where we should be, and
- is from top-down and outside in (Muirhead 2002, p. 16).

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<sup>4</sup> 'site' refers to the geographical location chosen for the Communities for Children initiative which differs from 'service' which refers to those services contracted in each C4C site under the Strategy.



This is not to say C4C lacks developmental features, also represented in this same table, as community members are considered to have the expertise to develop local solutions to local problems. This reflects a developmental approach, or bottom up grass roots approach, consistent with the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy's aim.

This appreciation of local ability extends to the different evaluation techniques identified by the Strategy and applied differentially according to the emergent learnings unique to the different sites. The success to which this is achieved varies from site to site. An overarching National Evaluation Framework (NEF), developed to inform the ongoing implementation and policy development of the Strategy, continued well into the service delivery stages of C4C. This Framework aims to inform policy development rather than site development for which each site is responsible, and further each service is required to evaluate outcomes.

Earlier evaluation considerations identified Action Learning and Research as a useful component said to "assist them [communities and families] to reflect on their learning, adapt their processes to achieve better outcomes" (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) Evaluation Consortium, 2002, p. 23). Alongside developing peoples' capacities, Action Learning and Research as "a form of institutional learning and capacity building" appears a tool through which to 'up skill' people in 'place' (Australian Government: Department of Family and Community Services and RMIT University Circle, 2004, p. 22). This evaluation document recognises that what is needed is to "read up on Action Research literature before designing the project" (*ibid*, p. 4). Action Research, mentioned as one small component of the NEF, has had little effect on local level evaluation with many FPs and Community Partners often left unclear about evaluation processes for which they are responsible.

## **Looking futuristically**

The direction taken by Government is commendable as it identifies the importance of including community members in decision-making and program development. The means and ends of C4C are quite clear, (targeting early years development through creating various forms of capital, within a select place, through partnerships between governments, non-government organisations, businesses and the broader community). This leaves the processes of C4C less clear although provide an avenue through which Action Learning and Research could assist to develop the weaker components of a Place Management model.

## **Strengths of Action Research**

In preparing this paper, I began from a conceptual reference point belonging to a particular strand of critical theory. Attention to concepts of power and particularly those people excluded from processes around the development of this policy was (and is) central to my thoughts. Wanting to make positive contributions to this policy development, I found favour in Action Research principles and processes, which highlighted a framework through which to see those developmental aspects of the model that are working well, rather than focusing on the power politics. Illuminating points of connection from both theoretical formulations, I devised a Venn diagram to develop my thinking around the engagement of Place Management and Action Research and possibilities for change. Here I envisage Action Research as a broad framework that can bridge 'Management' in 'Place'.

Place Management and Action Research  
 "Meeting Ground"



Figure 1. Place Management and Action Research "Meeting Ground"

This comparison between Place Management and Action Research indicates points of departure where Place Management is more fitting with social planning while Action Research is developmental. The meeting ground, however, corresponds to three broad areas identified as, local setting, community building, and human capital. Let us now consider each.

*Local setting*

'Place', as in the C4C initiative, is geographically defined around social and economic disadvantage. People's sense of connection to or belonging to 'place' is as diverse as are these elements characterising place. A select place, in this sense must not assume wholeness, sameness, or a homogenising of 'community'. Large-group processes involving multi-stakeholder groups can provide people in place a forum through which to share understandings (Martin, 2001, p. 200). Principled upon Action Research goals and values large-group processes, which differs from large community planning activities, allow all participants the opportunity to

engage actively in planning. So, “large-group process ... can be designed as a form of action research that exposes collective knowledge and assumptions and uses these to generate the knowledge and power that lead to change” (*ibid*). This process exemplifies one of many Action Research techniques, which, when effectively implemented, has potential to bring together people of a region around the development of a target issue, like the development of children aged zero to five years.

### *Building community*

The SFCS envisaged from top-level government is visionary in its attempt at community capacity building.

Acknowledging the failure of traditional silo responses in dealing with complex social problems has prompted governments to consider alternative structures. Inviting the community sector to form partnerships around a target area has not only challenged conventional administrative approaches but also raises new challenges for the wider community to think critically and creatively about ways of working together. Newly emerging governance frameworks for working more collaboratively are complex, involving time and commitment to devise processes honouring those principles of which SFCS asserts. A process requiring both action and reflection whereby as Anthony Kelly and Sandra Sewell (1988, p. 12) maintain “to build community, we need to be able to work with many different kinds of people, organisational structures and action emphases”.

Through Action Research processes exploration amongst participants, for example at the level of the committees, around the complex interwoven dimensions of the C4C model, as identified by participants, towards action and change is not only achievable but also desirable. Ernie Stringer (1996, p. 25) talks of community-based action research, as one stream of Action Research, which is

“organized and conducted in ways that are conducive to the formation of community – the “common unity.” This process following a cyclic approach of “look, think, act” (Stringer 1996, p. 17) provides a valuable resource in “building a sense of community” (Stringer 1996, p. 96) for which a thorough explanation of each dimension of the spiral is offered. If we are to consider community building processes then we need to embrace principles of participation, empowerment, inclusion, access, tolerance, diversity and sustainability towards this pursuit.

### *Human capital*

The third point of connection is Human Capital. This concept appears to unite Place Management and Action Research although there seems a divergence based in their definitions of Human Capital. The SFCS describes human capital as the level of skills, knowledge and health status of a people (Australian Government: Department of Family and Community Services and RMIT University Circle, 2004, p. 1) of which one aim of C4C is to develop human capital (*ibid*, p. 7). Five attributes used to measure human capital, under SFCS, involve skills and knowledge; capacity to adjust to changing circumstances; ability to contribute through participation; social interaction and decision-making; and management of health and disability (*ibid*, p. 8). These criteria imply human capacity as being about developing the psychological status of people, having first identified a set of personal deficits. Taking this view results in a differentiation between a training of people in desired skills with valuing people’s contributions, for which a collective set of skills once identified, are developed. An Action Research contribution then is one advocating an intrinsically iterative and naturally evolving set of events as determined by those people impacted by these. Developing personal efficacy and skills risks further isolating knowledges of which appears inconsistent with C4Cs aim – to unit people and organisations in partnerships. Here, Action Research helps

to identify strengths of a people as part of the process and not just focus on the deficits.

The Strategy, claiming a strengths-based approach, agrees principally, at least, that peoples' and communities capacities, once identified, can effect sustainable change. We cannot assume expert position simply because we may have greater knowledge about the development of children 0-5 years (as presented in Western Research literature) as there exist bodies of knowledge and expertise within the parents and families who formulate ways of raising children that can be superior to Western understandings. Action Research approaches assist people with identifying strengths and capacities as evidenced by them rather than those strengths and capacities predetermined or prescribed by others.

Drawing on experiences from two C4C sites, as evidenced in my research, illustrates how an Action Research process is influential in promoting human capital towards building 'community' in a local setting. Strong Indigenous engagement and participation is evident in the C4C initiatives in Site 1 while C4C Site 2 evidences very little, sporadic engagement given a similar set of activities. Indigenous community leaders, in Site 1, included in early discussions, were involved in needs based research for their local area (as bounded by C4C). From these discussions, certain people embraced the role of researcher through which to ask the wider Indigenous community their views about the early years development of children. These initial discussions with Indigenous people developed through to the people becoming researchers (with assistance from a researcher attached to the C4C project) designing and implementing questionnaires, with a highly successful return rate. Since this time, the Aboriginal Researcher group has formed the Aboriginal Community Action Group (ACAG) that engages in action around C4C issues and broader community interests.

Site 2 set out to obtain information from Indigenous groups through consultation and speaking with Indigenous leaders as similar to Site 1. Discussions mainly consisted of requesting representatives on various committees and participation in various community activities. Frequent attempts failed to ignite interest amongst the various groups resulting in little participation or engagement since C4Cs inception in the community. This input lacking has prevented vital contributions into organising community events. One event involving an Indigenous dancing group was organised with the group coming from outside the C4C imposed boundary. Revealed later was that local Indigenous elders opposed these arrangements given the dancing group were not connected to that land or 'place'. This clearly offended local Indigenous groups.

## **Conclusion**

In late 1999, Dorothy Scott asked, "if it takes a village to raise a child then what might it take to rebuild the village?" (2000, p. 1). Having come through the industrial era of 'progress' we find ourselves evermore returning to ways of conceiving of a civil society and those important connections and relationships that bind people in place. The family as a cornerstone of society has reappeared as the conduit through which to build community. It is through policies like C4C that evidences marriage between social planning policies and local developmental processes as a way forward.

Action Research, shown in this paper, provides processes through which Action Research has a role to play in this policy formula, even if its potential is yet to be realised. If we are about developmental processes owned and driven by the people then centralised government need to stand back and trust the process that involves the expertise of the people concerned. If, as the C4C model suggests, Place Management aims at sustainable structures then active

participation, as many advocates of Action Research purport, is the key to ownership that leads to sustainable outcomes: people willing to commit the time, energy and resources to shape *their* sense of community.

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# Using action learning for developing staff skills in interviewing children in child protection: a reflection on practice

- Melissa Lindeman

This paper draws on my experience as an education and training officer in a statutory child protection setting in the Northern Territory where I had the opportunity to implement a short action learning project to address identified training needs in the area of interviewing children. The initial experience of implementing action learning in this setting was disappointing. However, other staff development initiatives in the same work setting, where I was able to draw on the principles of action learning, were more successful. These experiences provided me with some insight into the potential application of these approaches in child protection work, and the conditions in which action learning is more likely to succeed.

## **Description**

The initial project was a small-scale action learning initiative undertaken in a Northern Territory office of Family and Children's Services (the organisation responsible for statutory child protection) with the aim of assisting staff to improve their skills in interviewing children. The project was initiated because management and supervisors had requested training in this area for their staff. As all members of the child protection team were new, a response was needed quickly. Although my organisational counterpart in

another office location was working on developing a training package on this topic (designed to be delivered to a group over several days), I did not feel able to duplicate this training. Firstly, I did not have the detailed content knowledge of this particular area. Secondly, a response was needed more quickly than would have been possible had I waited for the training package to be finalised, and for a suitable trainer to deliver the package to be available. For these reasons I felt that an action learning model would best meet the needs of the work group and would best fit with my background and experience (which included action research and action learning).

My background research on the topic revealed that developing staff skills in interviewing children presented challenges for staff development professionals in the area of child protection. Traditional approaches to training staff in interviewing children tended to be one-off workshops where the content is developed by the workshop facilitators based on what experts in the area regard to be the key knowledge required for effective practice. Poole and Lambe (1998, p.252) noted a “critical need to develop innovative teaching strategies that will help professionals translate abstract principles into flexible and effective interviewing”. Suggestions for effective staff training appearing in the literature emphasised opportunities for practice together with critical feedback (Federal Law Enforcement Training Centre, 1992, cited in Poole and Lambe, 1998) and critical self-reflection (Poole and Lambe, 1998; Zwiers and Morrissette, 1999). Others highlighted the need for training in particular aspects of interviewing children, such as questioning techniques, but did not go into detail about the most appropriate training strategies (Aldridge and Wood, 1998). Freeman and Morris (1999) concluded that knowledge-based workshop training programs may not adequately prepare child protection workers to conduct appropriate investigative interviews with children, and that knowledge about how to conduct such interviews may not

be the best indicator of whether someone is prepared for this aspect of the job. These themes are borne out by the recent findings of Westcott and Kynan (2006) who highlight the difficulty for child protection practitioners in maintaining and implementing the knowledge and skills they should have acquired during training on interviewing children.

The literature on training practitioners in interviewing children in general concurred with my understanding of professional development in other health and community services sectors where traditional (content-driven, and often didactic), approaches are seen to have limited effectiveness in translating new knowledge to practice. Kolb (1984) claims that learning is both an experiential and reflective process, which should be closely tied to the real world and the experiences of the learner. Understandings are seen to be constructed over time, connecting new information with existing knowledge in ways which have meaning for the individual (Horwath and Morrison 1999; Jarvis, *et al*, 2003; Moon, 1999). In this way, the learner's role is central in the construction of knowledge, removing the main focus from the 'teacher' (delivery) and content. A functional learning environment enables access to the learning process of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualising and experimenting, and all aspects of the organisation have a role to play in creating these conditions (Morrison, 1997). An over-reliance on 'off-site' and somewhat disconnected training may not deliver the best outcomes.

As an advocate of action research and action learning as effective models of practice change and development, I was interested in the application of these approaches to meet the training needs that I was asked to address. Action learning is a process of learning and reflection that occurs within an organised group process (commonly in work teams) where colleagues work on a common problem or issue (McGill and Beaty, 2001). It is learner-driven, and it always has the two elements of the growth and development of people and of

the organisation, and the simultaneous finding of solutions to problems (Inglis, 1994). Action learning is a cyclic (usually facilitated) process for drawing learning from experience, and involves both action and reflection on that action (Dick, 1999). Action learning is also an approach that does not require the trainer/facilitator to have a detailed knowledge of the 'content', or subject area, allowing for specialist input to be organised where necessary in response to the particular needs of the group.

Prior to commencing the project, I discussed the role and process of action learning with key staff, and obtained agreement to trial this approach from the Program Manager and the Casework Supervisor. I then held a brief meeting with interested staff to discuss their information and skill development needs and to seek commitment from them to participate in the project. I also needed to ensure there was sufficient interest from staff to engage in such a project. I then prepared a short summary of the how action learning is undertaken, and included the outcomes of this initial meeting in the summary. The summary contained basic information on action learning and the intended conduct of the project, under the following headings:

- What is 'action learning'?
- What sorts of projects do action learning groups (sets) work on?
- How does an action learning group (set) actually work?
- How can action learning help participants to develop skills? (drawn from Dick, 1999; and Inglis, 1994)
- How much time commitment is required?
- What is the common task or problem that this group will work on?
- What will the learning goals be?

- How will we know that this project has been successful?

A series of four meetings were held over a two-month period, with some individual follow-up and consultation occurring as required. These meetings were essentially designed according to the principles of action learning (although were perhaps a little more 'formal' or 'didactic' than would usually be associated with action learning processes), and were intended to meet the specific learning needs of the group as decided by them. Detailed notes were taken at each meeting and a copy given to each participant to include in their resource folder, which was provided as part of the project.

The model of the action learning used was intended to rely heavily on using participants' own reflections on real work experiences and therefore included some discussion on self-reflective practice. The project also utilised expert input to target learning needs arising in the context of these reflections (one session was led by child a psychologist). Attendance at the meetings ranged from 12 (initially) to four (at the final session).

During the preparation for and conduct of the project there was some anxiety and doubt expressed by key staff about the effectiveness of this approach. Some concerns expressed to me were:

1. that the model does not emphasise content consistency and therefore some important material may not be covered;
2. it is unlikely that there will be consistent attendance, that is, some staff may not be able to attend all meetings and therefore some staff will not learn as much as others (the nature of child protection work means that staff will often be unable to regularly attend scheduled meetings);



3. the model does not provide certainty that staff have all the skills they need to carry out effective interviews with children;
4. people learn by hearing from experts, and a trainer with no real expertise in interviewing children will have credibility problems.

These concerns all have some validity; however they are probably equally valid for any other educational strategy. On reflection, I recognise that I didn't spend enough time trying to address these concerns before commencing the project. I also feel that I took on some of the anxiety of the project not being 'content driven', as in point 4 above, and possibly tried to 'provide' too much information to participants, rather than following the pure model of action learning where the process is learner-driven. I doubt whether the participants would feel that they had truly been empowered in setting their own learning goals and strategies. Another important fact is that I was new to the role, and the staff (with the exception of the Program Manager) had no experience in approaches to learning such as the one that I was suggesting.

Facilitating staff to use (and develop) self-reflective skills was intended to be a feature of the project. Zwiers and Morrissette (1999) encourage professionals involved in interviewing children to develop techniques for self-reflection as a means for reliving and recapturing experience in order to understand it, learn from it, and develop new insights and appreciations. And it is acknowledged more generally that critical reflection is important to ensure that the desired learning results from real work experiences (Moon, 1999). Therefore, I included some materials and time in each session to enable this process. However, only a minority of participants in the project seemed to grasp the need for, and would engage in the process of, critical reflection. This could have been due to a number of reasons

including that critical reflection was not generally part of the office or team culture (or at least was not identified or named as such). Or it could have been due to my approach to trying to encourage reflection. I approached the project with the assumption that as most participants were professionally trained, they would have familiarity with critical reflection on their work and/or the work of the organisation as a whole. However, this assumption placed too much emphasis on the experience and values of the individual practitioners. Had I taken more time to assess the work setting, I may have focussed attention initially on creating more opportunities for critical reflection in all aspects of practice (and not just in the context of this project). Alternatively, I may have recognised that critical reflection did occur but was not named as such. Where critical reflection is part of the office/team culture (and, importantly, is recognised *as* critical reflection), it is unlikely to appear threatening, or new, or 'time wasting'.

### **Reflecting on the experience**

Reflecting on this experience, I recognise that busy practitioners, particularly in child protection settings, had very different expectations of how training should be delivered and experienced than what they were offered in this project. Training can often be seen as 'time out' from their demanding and stressful roles and most expect that the training event itself will provide them with the information and skills that they need. Participatory and empowering approaches to learning and development were not familiar to these practitioners.

Unfortunately, for those that usually attended training with the expectation of being provided with all the information they need, they would not necessarily have had this perspective challenged in a positive way through their participation in this project. I also recognise now that the inexperience of the work team (learning set) in interviewing

children also meant that there was insufficient case material (and depth to their experience in this area), to engage the group in critical reflection on their own practice.

Despite this disappointing experience, I did not abandon the belief that action learning models can be effective. Two subsequent initiatives, focused on different subject areas, had far more positive results. One involved another work team (comprising six staff) in the same office, initiated by them to share and consolidate their skills in foster carer assessments. This was a different experience in that the whole work team was involved and participation remained constant (unlike in the first project where 12 commenced, but only four attended the final session). As the staff had approached me with their request, I did not establish the process as a formal action learning project, as I had done for “interviewing children” learning needs. However, the principles of action learning were followed; the group was fully involved in setting their own learning objectives and strategies for meeting them, with me acting as group facilitator and enabler. The group was aware of different approaches to training and learning being used in this initiative, although it was not named as an action learning project. A major difference with this team, which may also have contributed to the success of this initiative, was that the workers operated on a less crisis-driven basis than the staff involved in initial child protection investigations, and they were more able to commit to attend meetings. The group was comprised of both experienced and new staff and thus was more conducive to practice-based discussions. The work team also had an established culture of discussion, possibly due to the less immediate demands of the work compared to child protection and to the leadership style of the senior caseworker.

The other positive staff development activity, where the principles of action learning were followed, was a facilitated group discussion process aiming to develop a commitment

to, and a shared understanding of, cultural safety in child protection. Participation was voluntary and open to all staff. A core group of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff participated throughout the whole group discussion process including those that had initially articulated their desire to develop an understanding of cultural safety in child protection settings. Other staff members who were not involved in the core group were invited to contribute ideas and comments in focus groups, the findings of which were discussed in staff meetings and other team discussion opportunities. Although not established as an action learning project, the principles were followed and some powerful learning and critical reflection resulted for the whole staff team (see Zon, *et al*, 2004).

These initiatives described above were all undertaken in a relatively small workplace, where several staff teams involved in all aspects of child protection (including myself as education and training officer) were co-located. The first encounter with action learning floundered, and my perceived lack of appreciation of critical reflection by the group may have been a contributing factor. However, in the subsequent initiatives critical reflection occurred as a natural part of the group processes; it was not imposed on participants as an essential 'ingredient' in the learning process (the issues and strategies for addressing them were also genuinely driven by the participants). Over time, and with a supportive management team, my role as education and training officer was seen to be broader than simply arranging and delivering the commonly understood training workshops. Rather, the workplace culture began to accept that the education and training officer was a resource person who could participate more broadly and directly in the workplace such as through facilitating discussions, and working in close partnership with staff teams to meet their (broadly identified) professional development goals. Also, as my own appreciation of the workplace culture developed I could seek out opportunities to engage with work teams in

more direct and involved ways.

## **Conclusion**

Action learning faces obstacles in the environment of child protection. The crisis-driven nature of practice, and the high demands on staff means that training is often viewed as something separate from practice. Formal learning opportunities are often established as external, one-off workshops where attendance is less likely to be overtaken by competing priorities than other forms of (work-based) learning. Any potential obstacles to action learning in child protection settings (such as competing work priorities, different expectations of training and learning, unhelpful workplace culture, lack of experience of participatory learning) need to be seen as challenges rather than reasons not to proceed with these approaches. Where child protection workplaces have access to education and training personnel who can work flexibly and can integrate their role within the workplace (as I could), then there are many possibilities for professional development and practice change as indicated by two of the approaches described above. More trials of participatory or action learning approaches would provide valuable information for managers and staff development professionals in child protection to determine whether this is a viable and effective model for improving staff skills in interviewing children, as well as other important subject areas.

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# **Facilitating organisational development through the action research process**

**- Barbara Horner and Ernie Stringer**

This paper reports on an investigation of the complexities and challenges of change in a community-based aged care facility in Western Australia that explored the impact and influence of change on the community. The participative action research study operated in three phases, including two action research cycles, over a two-year period (2002-2003) and centrally involved a critical reference group (CRG) comprised of the senior management team (SMT) and researcher. It adopted a broadly qualitative methodology, using qualitative and quantitative data from participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, two 'quality of service' surveys for independent living residents, and a staff satisfaction survey.

The findings of this study were presented as a narrative account of the experiences of the participants and revealed how the research process impacted on organisational practice, and on residents' wellbeing, described by them as quality of life. The findings also highlighted the challenge faced by community-based aged care communities, classified by government, the industry and the wider community as primarily not-for-profit, to balance financial accountability and social conscience. Outcomes of the study also indicated that change impacted on the structure and function of the organisation as it built its capacity for change. It reshaped the relationship between the Board and senior



management team (SMT) by improving communication, work relations and leadership effectiveness. Finally, the study demonstrated the value action research process, providing the SMT with tools and processes to plan, act, analyse and reflect on the many aspects of organisational change.

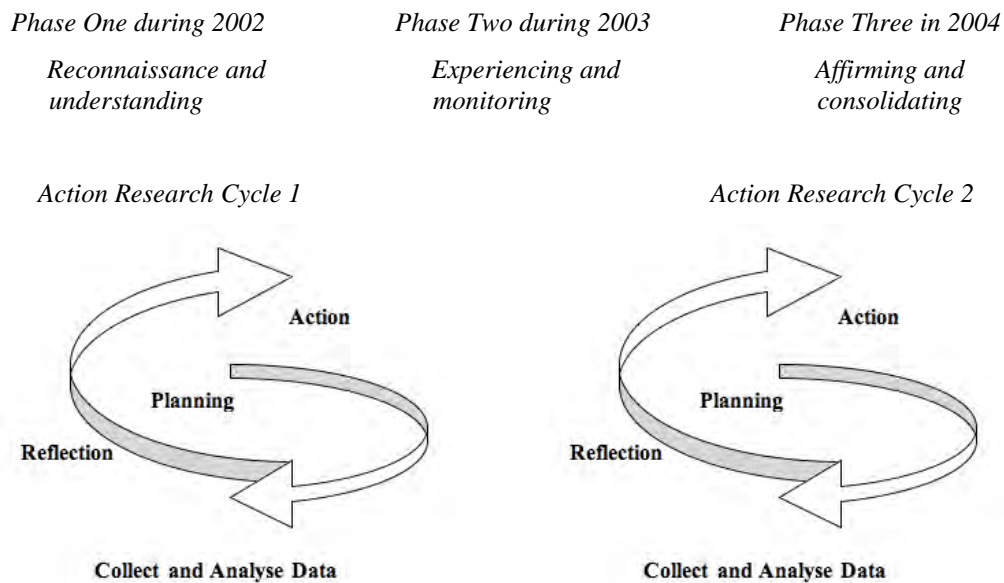
## **The research process**

A participative action research approach was employed in this study. Action research processes of planning, data collection and analysis, reflection and action were employed to illuminate the complex dynamics of the change process within an aged care organisation. The provider had elected to embark on a redevelopment process and wanted to monitor and understand how the change that was associated with this redevelopment would impact on the organisation and its residents.

The study occurred predominantly over two years (2002-2003), with some continuation into a third year (2004), incorporating three phases of activity, including two action research cycles. A research team consisting of the researcher and eleven members of the senior management team (SMT) formed the critical reference group (CRG) and participated as equal members of the research team. The participative, sustained commitment called for by this study was additional to the regular workload of the senior managers so the research process needed to be flexible and adapt to the work environment and work priorities.

Figure 1 presents the three phases of the study during 2002-2004 and the associated action research cycles. It shows that action research cycle one occurred predominantly in the first phase of the study (2002), action research cycle two was predominantly in phase two, beginning in 2003. However,

the action from this cycle progressed into 2004 and became the third phase of the study.



*Figure 1: Study phases and action research cycles*

While there were clear stages within each cycle, there were also a number of ‘mini cycles’ of planning-action-reflection. The researcher first gained entry to the organisation, establishing interest and involvement, building rapport and trust and establishing the senior management team (SMT) and researcher as the critical reference group (CRG) for the study. They attended senior management team meetings at least monthly and, often, every two weeks, and completed the first of three interviews with members of the SMT.

Phase Two occurred during most of the second twelve months (2003). It built upon feedback and reflection from phase one and involved the second action research cycle. Again, there were a number of ‘mini cycles’ of planning-action-reflection within the cycle when participants became aware of further issues and questions, explored future plans and determined action. Participation in SMT meetings, additional planning meetings, interviews with residents’

representatives, interviews with a sample of staff, and further interviews with individual members of the SMT, provided a comprehensive body of data. A management development plan, the development of a new model of care and service framework and adoption of a community-focussed and whole-of-site development plan, were all outcomes of the action research process.

Phase Three of the study began towards the end of the second twelve months and continued into the next year, until the cessation of this study in mid 2004. While this phase did not involve an action research cycle, there were several 'mini cycles' of planning-action-reflection. Activities within this phase evolved from the reflection and resulting action of the second phase, with the researcher as more of a participant observer than earlier in the study. In this phase the leadership team confirmed its future direction, strengthened its capability and began a structured process of implementing organisation-wide change. A workshop involving the CRG, Board and residents' representatives, affirmed the organisation's future plans. There was a more detailed exploration of the new model of care for service delivery and advancement of the site development plan, particularly planning for a new combined high and low care centre. This phase also revealed a change in management focus from quality processes to quality outcomes. It culminated in the creation of a new senior position, to facilitate organisational development and support a change management plan involving residents and staff.

### **Organisational change**

The literature on organisational change is diverse and a number of organisational change models have been proposed (Galvin, Andrews, Jackson, *et al*, 1999; Schaafsma, 1997; Ardern, 1999; London, 2001; Edwards, 2000; Chenoweth and Kilstoff, 2002). The classical writers in organisational change have concentrated on the ability for

growth in capacity and efficiency; however, this notion has been rejected by the human relations theorists, concerned with the social aspects of work and the individual. The work of Lewin (1938, 1942, 1946, 1948) has embodied this school of thought. Lewin provided a psychological view of the change process and based his model on individual behaviour relating to driving forces and resisting forces of change. Many others have built on the work of Lewin, including Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) and Rogers (1983).

Systems theory adds to an understanding of change by viewing organisations as open systems that interact with the external environment (Emery and Trist, 1965). This theory explains change as an interaction between external forces and internal adaptations. Social aspects of change and associated organisational behaviour look at the individual's reaction to the complexity of change and resultant organisational behaviour. Organisational change within health care is multifaceted, involving the inter-relationship between key stakeholders (McKee, Aiken, Rafferty, and Sochalski, 1998; Mackie, Holahan, and Gottlieb, 2001). Health care organisations are complex systems and change needs to be managed with attention to all stakeholders, including clients and staff. This is evident in this study, where the organisation had to be viewed as a changing system that was influenced by internal and external factors.

The concept of a learning organisation and its relationship to developing a theory of change (Senge and Scharmer, 2001; Trofino, 2000) has gained considerable interest in health care organisations. A learning organisation may be described as one that is skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Senge, 2001). Learning organisations view change as a process of transformation. Transformational change builds strong organisations that have the ability to continue to change as part of the growth process. Porter-O'Grady and Krueger-Wilson (1995)

identifies six priorities for transformational change: integrating the health professions; building structures around the continuum of care; building services around patient populations; constructing good information architecture; building partnerships with providers along the patient pathway; and developing links to subscribers and/or payer networks.

Changes to the delivery of a system of integrated services by a facility requires transformational change in terms of organisational structure and function, model of service delivery and knowledge and skills of the workforce. Involvement needs to be sought from clients and their families, empowered to participate in organisations and services. All levels of staff need to be involved in the planning and delivery of services through a cooperative model of management. The impact of change can be monitored and measured in terms of key indicators identified by the organisation, its staff and clients.

Major organisational change usually involves some loss, or at least a perception of loss, by those involved. Organisational change often falters not because the change is wrong but rather, that it is mismanaged. People progress through a transition process, a psychological reorientation, as they accept and adjust to change. Failure to prepare for and manage this period of transition can jeopardise the change, and perhaps the organisation, in the long run. Organisations facing the need for significant change must determine both a direction for such change and a strategy to realise it. A strategy for change may include systems such as structures, policies, processes, training and resource allocation.

## **Facilitating organisational change through action research**

While there is considerable literature on the characteristics and challenges associated with organisational change, there is little literature that discusses the specific characteristics and challenges of organisational change in residential aged care communities. Planning accommodation and services for a growing ageing population is of increasing importance to communities, governments and providers, and complicated by a need to respond to the needs of today's ageing population as well as anticipate the relatively unknown needs of future ageing populations. Shifts in population structures will bring about changes to physical and social environments, accommodation and services and the impact of such change needs to be monitored.

The importance of leadership in a change process is clearly revealed in this study and supported by the literature. The leader, or leadership team, has the responsibility to align the change with the organisational purpose and direction and to ensure organisational resources are made available to support the process (Edwards, 2000). The CEO could not be solely responsible for managing the change process. Therefore, the SMT leadership group had to engage in the process themselves before they could assist others to negotiate the change that was proposed. The uniqueness of the process for this particular organisation is highlighted in the steps taken by the SMT to achieve their goals.

Particularly significant elements of the change process highlighted in this study were the commitment and capacity of the Board and the relationship that developed between the Board and SMT. The strategic and operational plans were also important elements, as were the organisational policies, processes and functions. Organisational culture was another key element of the process and the study provides an understanding of both the characteristics of the culture and

the process of development to build a 'new' culture. Finally, the redevelopment plan and its evolution to a whole-of-site development plan was an important element of the change process. This study demonstrates the importance of engaging the key stakeholders in its development.

Research roles have traditionally been described as 'researcher', controller of the research, and 'subjects', the objects of the research (Stringer and Genat, 2004). This implies a power relationship where the researcher holds the power and the subjects are powerless. In action research, the intention is that the researcher holds no more power than any other member of the team. The research participants are collectively engaged in creating their outcomes through participation, where the outcome has meaning for them. Explanation, the outcome of a positivist worldview, is not reality itself (Baldwin, in Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.219): "Unless people participate in the construction of knowledge, the knowledge has no meaning for them."

Particular aspects of the role of the researcher in action research have been identified. They are: adaptation to changes in the research process, the ability to adapt to changes to schedules and work pressures among participants, the necessity for strategies to deal with large amounts of 'personal' and sometimes sensitive information from participants, the process of enablement and learning that occurs among participants and the balance between expert and researcher.

Action research in this study involved planned research cycles that involved identification of a problem or analysis of a situation through a process of reflection, planning and action that often resulted in change; then monitoring the effect of that action and revisiting the initial problem or situation to see what effect had resulted (Waterman, Tillen, Dickson, and deKoning, 2001). This process led to the

identification of new problems or situations that might shift the process into a different cycle of inquiry and action. This evolutionary process and the ability to respond to a 'live' process of inquiry, required flexibility and fluidity and the research plan varied over time. While this may be viewed as a great strength of this method (Waterman, *et al*, 2001; Robinson, 2001; Gloster, 2000; Stringer, 2004), it also presented a challenge for the researcher.

The action research process in this study also facilitated a learning process for the members of the SMT, who embarked on a process of individual and group inquiry as they learnt about the impact of the change process. The action research process also enabled residents to speak out on issues, to contribute their viewpoint and become more involved in the change process. From involvement as members of the Board and the Residents' Advisory Council, to informal contributions through interviews, meetings and written feedback, residents expressed their concern to the organisation.

The research process also provided opportunities for members of the SMT to reflect and comment on the research process as well as the outcomes. As part of the process of member checking, it was important to also provide opportunities for reflection on the experience of being part of the research as participants and the value of the research to the organisation. This occurred initially during regular meetings towards the end of the study, during the third phase. At this time, however, members of the SMT indicated a desire to comment individually. Following discussion, it was agreed that individuals would reflect on three areas:

1. The value of the research for residents and the senior management team,
2. The learning from the experience of being involved in an action research study, and
3. The value of the research for the organisation.



## **The value of the research for the resident and the senior management team**

Residents who had participated in interviews were kept informed of the progress of the study and invited on several occasions to make contact with the researcher for further information and/or involvement. Follow up did occur on a few occasions and visits were arranged or conversations held over the telephone.

At the workshop that occurred during phase three of the study, the residents' representatives discussed the value of the study and commented on their involvement. It was clear that residents appreciated opportunities to participate in these processes, to provide their perspectives on the issues being explored, and to be informed of developments as they occurred. One resident asked, "Are you coming to interview me again? I really enjoyed those sessions with you." Another commented, "It has been really good to be able to give the residents feedback about this at our meetings. We are really interested to see how this has all happened, to see how the study has fitted in. It made us feel more involved with what was happening when you interviewed us."

Further, residents were impressed by the outcomes of the action research process as it affected them. One outcome of the study was the formation of a Residents' Advisory Council, with elected representatives from within the resident community. Residents met regularly to discuss aspects of the change process and identify issues. The Council formed a communication channel to the CEO and then to the Board, as two elected members became voting members on the Board. A perception of more open, effective, facilitated communication between residents and management was a significant outcome of the study.

Members of the Senior Management Team were likewise impressed with the impact of the action research processes

on their planning activities. They appreciated the way the participatory processes and the flow of information derived from these explorations enriched and informed the complex issues with which they engaged. The following comments indicate the value of the study to the SMT. The specific member making the comment is not identified at their request:

*Working in administration can make you organisation/systems oriented, dealing with major decisions. The study reinforced the human aspects of our industry. It helped me to see how important it was to listen to the residents. Sometimes we assume what is best for the residents and cannot understand when they reject change, even if it is for the better.*

Another comment was:

*The study has validated the change process used. The feedback and information generated and provided has assisted greatly. The study has also helped to strengthen the relationships between the senior managers as well as the SMT and the Board.*

Further:

*The study has helped us to see what we are doing compared to other places, where we stand and where we can go. It has also helped us to see the way in which our change has affected the stakeholders and the improved outcomes over time. Residents are more informed and more comfortable speaking out and we are better at listening.*

*It has helped me to focus on our goals and strategic plan and because I was involved, without forgetting our illustrious and interesting past. It was also valuable to participate as part of the senior management team and I enjoyed our one on one conversations.*

For the members of the SMT who joined the organisation during the time of the study, it appears that the study provided them with additional value:

*Being a new member of the team, it has been really useful to read about the study over previous years and know where the provider has come from and how this can inform the plans and strategies for the future.*

These comments clearly indicate the way action research informed and enhanced the work of the SMT by:

1. maintaining their focus on the human aspects of their work, a focus easily lost in the complex administrative and technical work of a large organization,
2. validating the change processes they engaged by providing the means to review their progress in an ongoing way,
3. demonstrating the value of listening to residents and keeping them informed of developments,
4. strengthening relationships between key stakeholders in the organization,
5. maintaining their focus on the goals and strategic objectives of their activities,
6. clarifying the possibilities open to them, and
7. providing an ongoing history of events that enabled them to keep track of their progress.

Other comments reveal value of reflection in the learning process that occurred as the study progressed:

*I really enjoyed talking through the information and having the opportunity to hear what residents had said (to you). I think the process of reflection was really valuable for me.*

*The process made us stop and think more than perhaps we might have done. With our meetings so busy, it is always hard to make time to stop doing and just think about things. Because you were part of our meetings, we were able to think about other things as well as use your knowledge and experience in lots of ways.*

The processes of reflection inherent in action therefore assisted people within the SMT to:

- think carefully through the complex array of information,
- hear the residents perspectives on issues related to the change processes,
- think more carefully about issues, and
- extend the knowledge and experience available to them.

### **Learning from the experience of being involved in an action research study**

The aged care industry has limited experience in research processes and finds it difficult to allocate resources for activities other than direct care and operational matters. Members of the SMT indicated that involvement in this study was a new experience for them, extending their understanding of research in general and action research in particular.

One member commented:

*This study has exposed me to research but not action research. I really enjoyed the participative nature of the study, being involved. I didn't feel like it was your research but rather ours. While the process was rigorous, it was still friendly, sort of informal at times and I really enjoyed the feeling of being within it.*

Another commented:

*It has reinforced my belief that an organisation is a sum of its parts and it needs to understand where it has come from before it can move forward. It is important to involve everyone. In the same way, the process has reminded me that the slightest change in situations causes a ripple effect throughout the whole community and can have consequences for everyone. The research process helped me to see the whole picture of what we were doing.*

*One of the main challenges has always been the problem of 'change' and change management, both for the residents and staff. The framework of this study helped me to clarify this concept and to see how that can be handled better.*

*Probably the most significant experience for me was to enable me to focus on incremental adjustments (clarified as steps along the way) required in relation to the process of change, by listening to the feedback to actions and having the opportunity to reflect on information and situations.*

*I saw the organisation journey back to base when the Board and SMT revisited the vision and mission. The process provided an opportunity to listen to others and to test my thoughts against others. It was a real learning process for me.*

The processes of systematic investigation that are essential components of any research process obviously were of great value in assisting SMT members to engage a rigorous, yet enjoyable and productive process of planning and change management. They appreciated the effect of the participative processes on their relationships with each other, the feeling of involvement and ownership, and the increased clarity gained from the technical procedures involved. Not only were they able to 'see the whole picture' by revisiting their vision and mission, but they were able to maintain focus on the incremental changes required as they implemented processes of change.

### **The value of the research for the organisation**

The comments during meetings and from interviews highlight the role of the researcher and illustrate the combined researcher/expert role that often occurs in action research:

*Your knowledge and experience was invaluable to the organisation. You had access to and shared with us so much that we would not have had (access to) during the study.*

*The independence of the research process, you as an outsider, validated what we were doing and gave access to research expertise that we did not have. But I never felt like you were directing it, just coming along with us.*

*We were able to access all sorts of information during the study and to learn from the research experience. I really believe we have made some better decisions, because of the study.*

During one SMT meeting, a member commented:

*At first I wasn't sure if this (the study) was going to be much use, even get in our way. But over time it became clear that we were really lucky to be involved. Aged care providers rarely have money for research and it was very interesting to see how this study evolved over time and how we seemed to drive what was happening. I was surprised to see this, it was kind of our study.*

Finally, one manager commented:

*I guess I didn't really understand how this would impact on us. I think that the research has brought some clarity to what we have been doing and to some of our decisions and the rationale behind our decisions. A great deal has happened during the length of the study and I think we have a better picture of how we have changed because of it (the study). I think the story of our journey is as important as the journey itself.*

There were no negative comments identified by the SMT in relation to the research process. It is worth noting, however, that one member of the team who had expressed some personal comments that were less positive, left the organisation during phase three of the study. As has been discussed earlier, the research process of feedback and reflection results in considerable discussion and sharing of ideas. Similarly, the interview process revealed personal reactions and responses, which may have been uncomfortable for this individual. The SMT progressed through a period of considerable growth and development, some of which was facilitated by the research process.

## **Action research provided a process for engagement in organisational change**

This study provided tools and processes that could be used to plan, act, analyse and reflect on the many aspects of organisational change. It enabled the organisation, principally the SMT, to reflect on the impact and influence of change that resulted from the process of organisational redevelopment. Action research emphasises the concept of co-researchers and stresses the notion of participation as fundamental to achieving more democratic processes and the realisation of practical, relevant outcomes (Stringer and Genat, 2004).

The action research method enabled an understanding of the complexities and challenges that the organisation faced as it embarked on a process of redevelopment and subsequent change. In particular, it provided: a structured process to explore new ideas and information; an opportunity for discussion and debate; a reason for reflection and review; a safe learning environment; individual ownership of decisions and action; and a collective ownership of outcomes.

The research process supported the SMT's development as leaders as well as the development of the team generally. It also assisted them to identify and address issues and problems associated with change. The process of planning, collecting data, analysing data, reflection and action provided a structure and process that they applied to routine management behaviour and deliberations, as well as situations that arose through the redevelopment process. The SMT's expertise in using the process to its best advantage grew over time. Individual managers identified value from the process and the structure, while the organisation recognised the value of the process as facilitating change.

Action research is 'done with' not 'done to' participants. The intention is to maintain an equal relationship among all participants even though at times, the researcher may be more informed about the research process. The researcher had knowledge of the process but the participants had knowledge of the setting. Action research calls for reflection and analysis of knowledge and action by all participants and consequently, has an educational function. This relationship was one of the strengths of this study. It is also one of the greatest challenges for the researcher. It requires a careful, measured balance between the role of researcher as a member of the 'team' and as a resource to the team because of wider knowledge and experience. As part of the research team, the researcher learnt with the group. But the research process itself and inquiry that came with being in a research role, brought additional learning. The researcher aimed to gain knowledge and understanding and share it with the rest of the team without directing the process. The researcher was slightly removed from the day-to-day events of the organisation and there was the potential to 'see' things from a more external point of view. Despite these challenges, action research is a powerful research methodology with particular application in social research.

### **Impact of the study**

Aged care organisations are facing a period of significant growth and development and it will be important to monitor and record this progress for the industry as well as the organisations. Resource implications in this industry often mean that research is not viewed as an essential activity even though there is increasing recognition of the importance of evidence-based practice. Action research provides an opportunity for aged care providers to engage and learn within research that facilitates growth and development while at the same time, enhancing the literature and strengthening the industry's research base.



This community has recognised the need for further research and has continued with several aspects of the research process, now incorporated into organisational development and practice. The organisation continues to monitor the impact and influence of change on the resident population and staff as the redevelopment continues, through ongoing communication and feedback processes. The practice of reflection and the cyclic action research process has been continued by the SMT. It is recommended that similar research be supported and encouraged more widely in the aged care sector to further the understanding of the complex issues associated with this sector.

There is need for further research into the impact of the ageing population on the demand for, and use of, aged care accommodation and services. It is recommended that further exploration into alternative models of care and service frameworks that will facilitate the flexible delivery of a range of services across sectors, according to need, be encouraged.

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# Contributing to learning to change

- Dianne Allen

As the amount and rate of change continues to grow in current society, learning to change is becoming a more significant generic capacity for individuals and cooperative and collaborative groups. While some change occurs naturally as we grow and develop as individuals, learning is part of the process of having flexibility in how we interact with our environment – physically, socially and relationally – to respond to difference and change in that environment. As we develop and mature, one of the maturation processes involves becoming aware of what has been learned, what is learnable, and what is no longer useful knowledge. When adults recognise that something learned, a habit formed, a routine response, is no longer useful, is indeed dangerous, they find they also need to learn how to change, and how to make a change in what has been learned in the past. The saying ‘old habits die hard’ is an indicative description of the complexity of this kind of change and what is likely to be involved in such change. In this article I provide a brief overview of my findings as I explored some of the issues involved in learning to change in the context of professional practice.

## **My starting context**

In 1997 I was endeavouring to round off formal studies in dispute resolution by undertaking a research project. My initial proposal was to study the origins of what was informing the thinking of practitioners in their dispute resolution practice. I determined to conduct a survey and

analyse the data collected. In my view, the quality and depth of the data were unsatisfactory and I looked about for another way of undertaking inquiry. Kenneth Kressel, one of the leading scholars in the field of mediation research, had reported on a look-back at processes that he and three other mediation practitioners had been involved in while mediating co-parenting disputes. They had documented their mediation sessions and held team case closing conferences and documented those discussions. As their practice developed they also took audio records of mediation sessions. In the look-back Kressel began to discern a pattern of process for himself and his team that he called '*practice-relevant research*', and designated as '*towards a reflective research paradigm*'. Its key components were the '*mediator-researcher self-study, using the case study as the unit of analysis and the research team as the vehicle of reflection*', (Kressel, 1997, p.155). He also recognised its links with Schön's concept of reflective practice, and issues that Schön and others have raised about the conduct of professional practice and appropriate education for it (Argyris, 1993; Baskett and Marsick, 1992; Schön, 1983, 1987, 1991).

As I considered the principles enunciated by Kressel, the approach seemed to represent techniques similar to those used by teachers to develop lessons, by managers in quality circles, by others conducting critical incident reviews: there were elements of learning from experience, by reflecting on experience and designing changed processes that dealt with issues raised in such examination and consideration. What Kressel's article did was go further and examine some of the issues that the traditional dominant empiricist approach raises of such a methodology, namely the risk of bias in self-study and the adequacy of case study. In Kressel's view the practitioner self-study, working with practice cases, was vital. It is the imperatives of practice that keeps the inquiry focused on practice-relevant issues. Further, Kressel

suggested that the risk of bias in self-study could be dealt with by the reflective vehicle being a team of practitioners, providing that such a team could undertake sound inquiry of their own practice. As Kressel identified aspects of this latter concern, I made an associative match with recent material I had been gathering in order to support management training at work, namely Whetten and Cameron's *Developing Management Skills*, and the tools there for self-assessment and development of self-awareness on a number of key dimensions, including tolerance of ambiguity and cognitive style (Whetten and Cameron, 1995). This provided me with a 'bright idea' for a professional development approach. I now needed to test that thinking, and consider how such a bright idea might be implemented, if it stood up to critical review.

### **Professional development activity design**

My bright idea can be expressed in hypothetical terms: if self-awareness tools, together with structured reflective protocols, and an action learning process, were introduced to a group of peers, would it assist them in the move to a reflective research approach? Is an outcome of structured preparatory work an improvement in their capacity to engage in their professional practice?

The design was therefore a professional development activity based on the use of specific, publicly available inputs (from the literature) to develop self- and other-awareness, group processes, and awareness around the thinking-action complex of the practitioner, and where the focus of the thinking-action complex was about current practice concerns of the participants. The design endeavoured to take into account the role of time, context, and the intentional and unintentional. The support for its probable efficacy resides in the literature of 'action learning/science/research', experiential learning, adult learning, interpersonal

relationships and group dynamics, including dispute resolution, and professional development. I proceeded to engage in testing the design by: (1) enunciating it and its rationale and comparing the rationale with the documented results of other practitioners; (2) implementing the design with a number of groups of professionals and preparing how I would evaluate its effectiveness.

I used Toulmin's argument structure of syllogistic reasoning to prepare for the evaluation process (Dunn, 1982; Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik, 1984). I was aiming for an evaluation that was congruent with my professional development activity design. As far as possible the process would seek to rely on the self-assessment involved in self-awareness. A first step in developing that self-awareness included working on awareness of efficacy in operative group processes, and working at awareness about the thinking-action complex informing the individual's professional practice.

The responsibility for the participant's evaluation of the design lay with the participants. My pragmatic expression of such an evaluation was: if the participants decided to continue with the process beyond the negotiated timeframe, then the design could be considered to be successful, since busy professionals will work at something that they find really useful. If not, the design was not sufficiently compelling to warrant further effort.

As a participant myself, I had two evaluative roles: firstly the evaluation of the effectiveness of the reflective research of practice for myself, and my own practices of facilitation, of inquiry, and of facilitating inquiry; and secondly of the evaluation of the design as a useful professional development activity. In the course of the inquiry I found



myself revisiting my understanding of the nature of learning (learning to change), of inquiry, and of evaluation.

### **Inquiry findings: participants' perspective**

The professional development activity was conducted amongst two groups of five women. The first group was of experienced Adult Basic Education (ABE) teachers at an outer urban College of Technical and Further Education whose experience ranged from 2-14 years in the ABE role. The second group was of experienced clinical nurse consultants and a service coordinator, involved in health and aged care services, again, in an outer urban community (CNHS). This time experience in the current role ranged from 2-21 years. The participants came to the professional development activity from their current context, and had particular objectives in mind for their own sense of professional development. The organisations from which the participants came were in the process of responding to government policy and change to direct service provision: away from previous models of public service toward a more commercially oriented ethos. Consequently, both groups were experiencing significant pressure for change. Such pressure may have 'primed' them to be looking for answers in the professional development activity. Be that as it may, both groups found that the professional development activity did assist them with those current problems.

For the participants of the ABE group, the focus was on negotiating service delivery contracts with external parties and on the development of their team. The professional development activity also drew on the Harvard Negotiation Project analysis of negotiation process (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991). The combination of tools enabled them to prepare in a meaningful way for the negotiations, and from within a frame which allowed them to perceive the negotiations as part of a process where the quality of the

process was as, or more, significant than any particular case outcome. Immediate success became less important than it had been in their previous expectations. The self- and other-awareness tools helped develop openness within the group, and together with the focus on joint engagement in negotiation preparations helped build the teamwork.

Further, when the self-awareness was directed at stress and stress management and the nature of negotiation and its stressors, the experience that negotiating was stressful was seen to be reasonable, and the stress management concepts, applied to the negotiation context, provided an opening for reconceptualising the nature of negotiation so that expectations of single encounters were reduced, and investment in relationship was able to be honoured and valued, moving the perception of negotiation from a 'commercial' activity to an aspect of relationship investment in a 'cooperative' problem solving context, something more in line with the values underpinning their teaching processes.

For the participants of the CNHS group, the expressed needs of dealing with isolation, powerlessness, change, and the complexity associated with competing values involved in having to fulfil the various different roles expected of their level of activity, appeared to be dealt with by:

1. convening as a group,
2. expressing the sense of isolation,
3. focusing on current practice concerns,
4. acknowledging the role of values in professional practice, and
5. taking action to revitalise an organisationally based forum for clinical nurse consultants and reclaiming the nursing professional focus from the managerial and administrative focus that had developed more recently.

Again, the self-awareness material, the focus on thinking associated with action in-practice, the acknowledging and valuing difference within the group from self- and other-awareness as a possible resource in joint problem solving, seemed to have worked together in the group interactions on current practice concerns in a way that resulted in a revitalised sense of efficacy in agency. The restored confidence in agency allowed the participants to take action and look at the action and its outcomes as a point for more learning.

### **Inquiry findings: design perspective**

I, as practitioner, was evaluating my professional development activity. In doing that, I was trying to determine to what extent the outcomes reflected the intentions. Such an evaluation is usually designated as a 'program evaluation' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Hawe, Degeling, and Hall, 1990).

I had analysed the design, and determined that I was intending to develop change, if the design was successful, on six fronts: self-awareness, other-awareness, group process, reflective work, critical thinking and action learning. Consequently, in-practice, and when analysing the data available from questionnaires, from individual participants' end-of-session 'reflections', from in-session interactions I had observed and recorded, and from other sources including documents developed in-session, interviews and audio records and transcripts developed from some engagements, I was consciously looking for indications that there had been some change on any of these dimensions. All participants recognised benefit from the process, on one or more of the dimensions. Some participants were able to identify and express more change than others. The dimension where there was greatest consistency of change across the

participants within the two groups was on the awareness of thinking about the issues involved.

As a practitioner, looking for an effective professional development design, the responses were sufficient to encourage me to continue using this approach with other groups. Using my pragmatic evaluative criteria – that the groups would continue to operate with this approach beyond the negotiated project time – the process did not reach the level of success that I hoped for. Nor was I able to discern clear evidence of the groups operating at a level beyond their prior experience and where there was engagement with the assumptions underlying their practice activities and concerns and robust critical examination of those assumptions. There were some slight indications of possible developments of this potentially more transformative kind, but more time would be needed to demonstrate that such a change was developed and sustained.

As I became more aware of the participants, and the implications of their expressed understandings of themselves, and of the tools being used with them to develop self- and other-awareness, group processes, and reflective work with their thinking-action processes, it became less tenable to draw one-to-one relationships between design inputs and individual and group responses, as evidence that the design ‘worked’. Nevertheless, the whole network of interactions and responses did generate significant action changes for the individuals in both groups, indicating that some of what had been intended could be judged to have been achieved.

As one participant aptly expressed it:

*These insights do appear to be helping because I feel as if I'm coping better, but I still wonder if I am supposed to do more with*

*these insights. ...It was good to reflect on the strengths/ skills developed over the previous weeks. You almost don't realise it's happening.*

Enacting the design in-practice showed up some expected constraints of the practice situation, both for the participants and the facilitation practice.

The engagement with the participants was negotiated within the frame of an organisationally approved activity within a university research degree program. While this frame gave the program status, it made owning and continuing with the process difficult for the participants once the negotiated period was completed. While the design was flexible enough to still deliver some positive outcomes in the practice context of time constraints and expected practice disruptions, both groups recognised that the level of continuity, for the individuals and the groups, was a significant component of its effectiveness. As an inquiry process, the level of dislocation meant that the discipline of reflective documentation became a significant tool for ongoing effectiveness. My own experience of the process of documentation confirmed the value of such documentation, and repaid the time resources devoted to it. The participants who had not previously used that technique experienced some indicators of its value. However, the level of documentation of reflective work experienced by the participants in the design in-practice did not appear to reach its potential and commend itself as part of ongoing practice, except where such a practice had already been established.

One outcome of running the design with two groups, sequentially rather than concurrently, meant that learning about the design from enacting it with one group could be used with the second group. Such learning applied particularly to how the self-awareness tools were used and when. The design moved, in my thinking, from a more

structured presentation form to a more responsive guidelines form. Such a move tended to make the outcomes less easy to identify in relation to the inputs, as an evaluatory process, and tended to result in the presentation of a particular self-awareness item in closer relation to an identified practice issue, which might explain some of the second group's sense of seamlessness with their practice concerns, expressed in the comment: "You almost don't realise it's happening."

The enactment of the design also highlighted the personal component of this kind of work, both for the participants and the facilitator. For the participants, the inputs and engagement raised a sense of confidence and efficacy-in-agency, and generated some experiences of integration for some.

Looking at the findings that emerged as a whole – apart from the participants' expressed objectives or the design's intent – indicated that the design did serve to correct some of the impact of organisational demoralisation. The value of acting on a restored sense of efficacy and individual autonomy appeared to be reinforced by the whole process.

### **Inquiry findings: self-study**

The self-study demonstrated that the design was effective in developing my awareness of self-, of other-, of group processes, of the value and nature of the reflective work needed to commence the task of adjusting the thinking-action complex in a way that led to more effective practice. The design was reflexive, generating the change intended in me as well as others, and others' inputs also generated change in me. Inputs generating change for me included inputs from the interactions with participants during the professional development activity; the literature; and the

change developed from my reflective consideration of those interactions in the light of the informing literature.

My particular attentive focus of learning-by-doing was on the development of my understanding of (1) the nature of reflective work in-practice, and (2) my facilitation practice. The focus on the nature of reflective work in-practice highlighted some discrepancies between my expectations developed from the wider literature of reflective practice and my in-practice experience of these two illustrative cases. This discrepancy has given me pause to be more attentive to the nature of the specific contexts of such reported studies. It is only when such contexts *match* with the nature of the specific contexts of a practice that another's findings are likely to provide valid information for the in-practice situation.

The focus on my facilitation practice identified (1) the importance of preparation and prior experience in effectiveness in-practice; (2) more awareness of my Model I behaviour (Argyris and Schön, 1996) and points where that might have an impact on my effectiveness as a facilitator; and (3) a beginning capacity to use reflective work to identify and address some of the subtler awarenesses that might prove to generate improvement in practice in due course.

While my level of preparation meant that material could be designed to address concerns that developed as the process unfolded, my alertness to some practice issues was not yet honed to the level where that designing reflection-in-action could mobilise my prior experience in a way that meant that I could respond effectively to the presenting issue during the facilitation session in which it arose. That meant, in turn, that the impact of the level of continuity, or discontinuity,

arising from the constraints of ongoing practice obligations, was greater than it might have been with a more aware practitioner.

One of the developments of subtle awareness that occurred for me during the in-practice experience was the identification of what I call 'a paradox associated with meta-process'. It involves a reflexive aspect of professional practice and professional practice improvement by self-study, where the subject is the object and vice versa. I was able to discern, in the engagements with the participants, and in the observation of my own practice, a point where, in-practice, we lose sight of the process of that practice, and how it applies to ourselves as we endeavour to problem solve and to improve practice effectiveness.

For the participants in the teacher group it was a matter of not being aware that the processes of my professional development activity design which were effective were, in-practice, very similar to their own practice of teaching adult basic education, and further, that they could not mobilise those processes easily, to engage in the improvement of their own practices, systematically, and intentionally. The doing of the practice with others, was given first, second and more priority. The improvement of that practice for themselves, by devoting time to that effect and using the same techniques, was not considered as important.

For the participants in the nursing group, it was a matter of not being aware that again, my designed professional development activity, as it expressed itself amongst them, and responsively to their interests and concerns, was similar (a mirrored reflection?) to their own practice of assessment and mobilisation of resources to address clients' problem conditions. The self-care implicit in the work needed to



undertake improvement of practice, and to develop personal efficacy in-practice, including the individual's management of stress, again came second, third, or lesser priority to that of responding to client or organisational demands.

For myself, it was a matter of not being able, as a *first resort*, to mobilise reflective work to engage with the improvement of my writing, one of the key elements of the practice of a communicator. I was caught out in an expressed denial of the efficacy of my espoused process for my own practice.

Having become aware of this dilemma of practice, where the person is the instrument of practice, I have been able to discern further instances of subtle awareness of this phenomenon. In further practice development I expect to be able to enunciate the phenomenon, and check it with the participants, and seek to find in what way such an awareness allows us to make a breakthrough on our practice effectiveness. From my own experience, and my awareness of my internalities, I acknowledge that the process is slow. Further, it has required: (1) a variety of different kinds of inputs from external parties, including inputs that address macro- as well as micro- processes (or convergence and divergence as Heron and Reason call it (Heron and Reason, 2001)); (2) ongoing attentiveness, by me, to the contemporaneous description of what I am doing, together with how I am thinking about what I am doing; (3) trialling others' suggestions of how to go about the task; and (4) having some mechanism of evaluating performance and discerning change.

### **Learning/inquiry/evaluation: an interactive complex**

The lack of definitive and unambiguous results of change from the professional development activity, and the

awareness of the subtleties being discerned, firstly as an in-practice insight, and secondly as I engaged in closer attention to the evidence collected while conducting the professional development activity with others, required me to rethink what it was that I was looking for in my inquiry. I began to ask myself, anew: what was my understanding of what was involved in taking an action, and being prepared to undertake a different action in response to a presenting problem? I understand intentional action to be an action where one knows (has learned) what to do, and how to do it, and has some 'if-then' causal explanation for the expected outcome of such an action (a why-and-in-what-contextual-circumstances-understanding that such an action is likely to be successful). As I looked back on how my investigation developed, I recognised that I had been grappling with Learning/Inquiry/Evaluation, the interactive complex that is involved in preparing for thoughtful action to bring intentional change to people as individuals and in interaction with others. With such a focus I revisited the literature to see in what way it could now inform my understanding.

*Learning:* To make a change in practice, to improve practice, there needs to be learning about practice, in particular an increased awareness about the nature of one's own practice. What is the nature of the learning required to improve one's own practice? I argue that part of the answer is: it needs to be 'actionable knowledge' in Argyris' terms, and 'learned' in Argyris' terms - where the actor is able to detect and correct the error (Argyris, 1993). To correct error involves being able to take a different action, or to change the thinking related to the action, or sometimes to change both: the thinking and the action. Such change involves change in a number of areas (various authors), and at a number of levels (Bateson, 1972). It involves both formative learning, and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Where the change being sought is

in an interpersonal interaction or another systemic process, the learner about change needs to be aware of the dynamics of the interpersonal and of the systemic nature of dynamic relationships, and be able to respond with an appropriate inquiry process to explore the interactive system, to have sufficient valid information on which to design effective action that they are prepared, and able, to take. Where the change requires examining prior learning, including learning formed by inquiry, or involves some sort of perspective transformation, it also requires a shift in the awareness of processes of inquiry (Argyris, 1993; Bateson, 1972; Heron, 1996a, 1999; Schön, 1983), and may also require a shift in the application of possible evaluative frames in analysing the presenting problem (Schön, 1983). Such shifts represent the flexibility (Bateson, 1972) and openness to examine assumptions that the learner needs for that kind of learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Mezirow, 1991). In short, learning to change, at the level at which I was interested, is difficult, complex and takes time.

***Inquiry:*** To learn about practice, inquiry about practice has to be conducted. For the individual's practice, it is inquiry about the specific individual's actual practice. The individual's practice has some elements in common with all other practices, but some elements are idiosyncratic to the individual. To improve this practice it is up to individuals to identify their own learning needs. I argue that this involves self-inquiry. An aspect of self-inquiry involves self-awareness. What is the nature of the self-inquiry needed to improve practice? I argue that part of the answer is: it needs firstly to be appropriate to inquiry into practice. Further, being able to conduct that inquiry in a collaborative or cooperative context is needed to help manage both the complexity inherent in the practice context and the potential bias of the reflexive nature of self-inquiry.

It is now recognised that there are many ways to conduct inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002). Further, in making a choice about what method might apply in any situation, there needs to be a match between the nature of what is being investigated (ontology), the kind of knowledge sought (epistemology), the intrinsic values associated with the phenomenon being investigated (axiology) and the method used to form that kind of knowledge of that kind of phenomenon with its intrinsic values (methodology) (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Heron and Reason, 1997). In the case of inquiry into practice, this congruence needs to be at the level of taking action in-practice (Toulmin, 1996c): (1) able to be applied in-practice without distorting the practice (and there is a difference between 'distortion' and 'change') (Argyris, 1993); (2) generating actionable knowledge (actionable knowledge is the change being sought; actionable knowledge is in the interests of effective practice) (Argyris, 1993); (3) amenable to and cognisant of the particularities and time constraints within the practice context (McIntyre, 1995; Toulmin, 1996c), and the capacities of practitioners in the context of their practice with the parties involved in the presenting problem/s (Argyris, 1993; Heron and Reason, 2001; Schön, 1995, 1991); and (4) respecting the intrinsic values of the human beings conducting the practice and the relationships involved when other human beings are involved in the practice (Heron and Reason, 1997). Such a method of inquiry is available in "action research/science/learning" in its various forms (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Its effectiveness for the individual practitioner is enhanced when that practitioner is aware of the extent to which the personal, including the practitioner's own values and assumptions and action capacities, are informing that practice (Argyris and Schön, 1996; Heron, 1999). Its effectiveness is enhanced when the practitioner is able to undertake the inquiry with others who can assist the practitioner manage the complexity of practice inquiry and manage the potential biases of self-

study, and who can require the practitioner to give an account of the intrinsic human values being exercised in the study (Heron and Reason, 1997, 2001; Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

For many inquirers, learning to undertake this kind of inquiry may well involve learning to change, as described above. Part of the practitioners' ineffectiveness may well reside in the form of inquiry that they naturally, or automatically, mobilise, and some of the change needed is then with that form of inquiry.

***Evaluation:*** To make any change involves:

- a. investigation to suggest what needs to be changed and how to change it,
- b. then a decision to act, where the action to be taken is informed by the investigation, and
- c. then reviewing the learning from the results of the investigation, the acting, and ongoing investigation of the results of the action, to know that change in all its fullness (Argyris, 1970, 1993; Whetten and Cameron, 1995).

The basis of that decision to act needs to be as sound as possible. How we evaluate soundness to inform such a decision is then part of the process. What form does this evaluation take? Is that evaluation itself soundly based? A first step in identifying the form of the evaluation, to be able to check on how soundly based it is, involves becoming self-aware about one's active values – the values one acts upon.

Those active values are used in the investigation of what needs to be changed. The active values are applied to select which change, of all possible changes, needs (is greatest in

priority, or is easiest to do, or by some other criterion is chosen) to be made. Values determine the direction in, and extent to which the intended change is to occur. The active values are used in the investigation of how it needs to be changed, and in choosing between different possible ways of reaching the same intended outcome. The active values are used in determining to what extent the actor is content that the intended outcomes have been reached, with least unintended adverse impacts, and therefore, to what extent, in ongoing action, further changes need to be made. To the extent that any action has produced change, the actor needs to be able to keep on taking different and appropriate actions that respond to the needs now developed from the outcomes of such change. Consequently, being an effective practitioner implies ongoing learning and inquiring, with their concomitant evaluating, in conditions which are now new and different by virtue of the effectiveness of the initial and ongoing action.

The activities involved are operating at a second-order, meta-level, where the whole process may be considered to be learning about learning, inquiring into inquiry in order to learn, evaluating an evaluative practice of inquiry for learning to act. In that understanding, actors are evaluators who are reflecting on their mode of inquiry. Actors are directly involved and therefore controlling the inquiry and are committed to achieving an improvement in their practice. The change, of action, or of thinking, or of the thinking-action complex, is a result of applying the actionable knowledge derived from the evaluative review of experience. For thoughtful action to bring intentional change, learning, inquiry and evaluation are seen to be inextricably interrelated.

## **A particular application: evaluation in, and of, reflective research of practice**

In my inquiry I was testing my thinking: the concept I had developed from Kressel's work, reflective research of practice, had suggested a particular form of professional development activity. I had found that the professional development activity design had merit, but the outcomes, in the context, did not meet my expectations. Such a finding required me to reconsider my thinking, and about the nature of the processes 'learning to change', 'inquiring into inquiry', and 'evaluation'. Furthermore, I needed to review my conception of reflective research of practice, as *a* form of inquiry. What I found was that my original conception that 'reflective research of practice' was a *singular* form of inquiry was faulty. My study clarified the nature of *research of practice*, and that research of practice involves many forms, one of which includes *reflective* research of practice. The evaluative criteria used *in* research of practice and used to determine the quality *of* research of practice are then quite various.

When a certain kind of evaluation is conducted in a reflective research of practice, then the quality of the outcome is related to the quality of that kind of evaluation. For a practitioner, the fundamental touchstone is, as Heron and Argyris claim, in the practical, in being able to be enacted (Argyris, 2004; Heron, 1996b).

From my study, I settled on an understanding that the process particular to 'reflective research of practice' – being reflective – is, as Schön indicates, the application of a series of evaluations on a range of dimensions (Schön, 1983, pp.76-104, especially p.102). The kind of evaluative criteria that would be congruent with the *reflective* component of *research of practice* relate to (1) the process – the exercise of reflective

judgement; (2) the content – the personal and the particular aspects of a person's own practice, including the preferences and emphases of the individual's exercise of reflective judgment; (3) the context – in operational practice conditions; and (4) the interactivity between these components.

Furthermore, I found that *reflective research of practice*, rather than being distinctive, might be more usefully designated as 'practitioner self-study' (Loughran, 2004) or 'living educational theory' (Whitehead, 1989). It needs to be recognised that self-study by reflective work is reflexive, where the subject becomes the object and the object is an actor. Consequently, the most effective aspect of such inquiry tends to lie in its reflexivity – the capacity to turn its own processes on itself. However, mobilising reflexivity may also be the most difficult aspect of such a practice, subject to the paradox associated with any meta-process.

## **Conclusion**

Working with self-awareness, and by using attention to reflective work on actions and thinking, does help practitioners improve their professional practice. The efficacy of the process appears to lie in the increase of confidence that is developed by (1) becoming more aware of what the practitioner's actions and thinking are, and the relationship between the thinking and the acting, and (2) in the process of becoming more aware, also being able to examine the bases of such thinking and acting, and either re-affirming the practitioner's commitment to those bases or being able to consider some alternative approaches and to choose a new way of thinking and acting where the values expressed in the thinking-action complex can be discerned to more accurately reflect the practitioner's intentions.



Furthermore, to become more self-aware involves an ongoing and iterative engagement with evaluating practice against alternative practices – the practices of others as observed or shared in peer interactions, or as derived from published accounts. In making these comparisons, a practitioner may also become aware that the process of evaluation is more complex than first anticipated, involves multiple evaluations, and in-practice, in context, such evaluations can be applied in a variety of sequences to deliver different possible and practical outcomes.

In addition, the development of self-awareness is dependent on the development of effective reflective work for the practitioner, and the engagement in reflective work develops self-awareness – these activities are interdependent. The reflexivity involved in these processes also lead to the risk of confusion arising from muddling logical levels of analysis. One of the tools for managing such confusion, as well as the risk of the bias of self-study and the complexities of practice, is engaging in such activities in the company of peers. For peers to be consciously useful they need to understand the nature of such a risk, and the principles of effective, cooperative inquiry. Peer inquirers need to be seeking and honouring valid information from multiple sources; processing such information by free informed choice and awareness of an individual's in-action values; and testing the findings by the commitment to act on them.

In short, learning to change is difficult, complex and takes time. It involves an effective inquiry process, and also depends on an understanding of how we evaluate a proposed action and an awareness of what we value in making choices between options of action. To facilitate learning to change involves attending to the complexity, affirming the difficulty, and validating the time required to

undertake the inquiry involved in developing a congruent thinking-action complex that constitutes the desired change.

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Dianne Allen started out as a high school science teacher (1966-1973), then contested elections as an independent (1972-4), pursued retooling studies in librarianship, town planning, management, dispute resolution and adult education. Dianne spent 25 years in local government, with

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<i>Organisation name</i>		<i>If incorporated</i>
<i>Contact address</i>		
<i>Postcode</i>		
<i>Town / City</i>		<i>State</i>
<i>Nation</i>		
<i>A/H contact numbers</i>	<i>Phone</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>Email</i>		<i>Mobile</i>

**Contact person / Please send mail attention to:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Nature of Organisation

<i>Please say if your organisation is an Association, Society, Group, Network, Collective, Informal/Community, Set, Department, Business, Institute, Centre, Library or other configuration.</i>	
<i>How many members (approximately) does your organisation have?</i>	<i>Do you know how many are ALARA members? Is so how many?</i>

What are your organisation's interests/projects relating to action learning, action research?

<input type="checkbox"/> Action Learning <input type="checkbox"/> Action Research <input type="checkbox"/> Community Action/Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Schools <input type="checkbox"/> Environment/Sustainability <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluation <input type="checkbox"/> Facilitation of AR, AL, etc. <input type="checkbox"/> Gender Issues <input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Higher Education <input type="checkbox"/> Human Services (Health) <input type="checkbox"/> Learning Organisations <input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Manager and Leadership Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Methodology/Methods <input type="checkbox"/> Org Change and Dev <input type="checkbox"/> PAR <input type="checkbox"/> Process Management <input type="checkbox"/> Quality Management <input type="checkbox"/> Rural/Agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> Social Justice/Social Change <input type="checkbox"/> Systems Approaches <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Development <input type="checkbox"/> Team Learning and Dev <input type="checkbox"/> Vocational Education/HR
<i>Please specify</i>	

**Do you wish to be linked with a world network of people with similar interests and have your information included in our database and appear in our annual networking directory?**

- Yes       No

**Please complete payment details overleaf...**

To apply for ALARA organisational membership, which includes ALAR Journal subscription (2 issues per year), please complete the information requested overleaf and the payment details below. You do not need to complete the ALAR Journal subscription form as well.

Please note that the cost of organisational membership (affiliate and associate) is the same as for individual full membership. There is no concessional membership fee, but if an organisation has 10 or more individual members of ALARA (or 10 or more who would like to be electronic -only members) then organisational membership is free.

### Payment Details

*Category of subscription (all rates include GST)*

\$93.50 AUD **Mailing address within Australia**  
Full membership for organisations with mailing address *within* Australia

\$104.50 AUD **Mailing Address outside Australia**  
Full membership for organisations with mailing address *outside* Australia

**Method of payment:**  Cheque/Bank Draft  Money Order  
 Visa/Bankcard/Mastercard (*please circle card type*)

Card No:

Cardholder's Name:

Cardholder's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry Date:    /    /

***Cheques, bank drafts or money orders must be in Australian dollars and made payable to ALARA Inc. Please return completed application with payment details to:***

ALARA INC.  
PO Box 1748, Toowong, Qld 4066, Australia  
Admin: Donna Alleman  
Fax: (61-7) 3342 1669  
Email: admin@alara.net.au

# ALAR JOURNAL SUBSCRIPTION FORM

## Address Details

Mr/Ms/Mrs/Miss/Dr		
Contact Name	given names	family name
Organisation		
Address		
		Postcode
Town / City	State	Nation
Contact numbers	Phone	Fax
Email		

## Payment Details

**ALAR Journal subscription (2 issues per year) does not include ALARA membership entitlements (all rates include GST).**

### ALAR Journal Subscription rate for private individuals

- \$ 71.50 AUD for individuals with a mailing address *within* Aus
- \$ 82.50 AUD for individuals with a mailing address *outside* Aus

### ALAR Journal Subscription rate for libraries and tertiary institutions

- \$ 93.50 AUD for institutions with a mailing address *within* Aus
- \$104.50 AUD for institutions with a mailing address *outside* Aus

**Method of payment:**       Cheque/Bank Draft                       Money Order  
 Visa/Bankcard/Mastercard (*please circle card type*)

Card No:                     

Cardholder's Name:

Cardholder's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry Date:    /    /

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 PO Box 1748, Toowong Qld 4066, Australia  
 Admin: Donna Alleman  
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 Email: admin@alara.net.au

# Journal submission criteria and reviewing process

The Action Learning Action Research Journal (ALARj) contains substantial articles, project reports, information about activities, reflections on seminars and conferences, short articles related to the theory and practice of action learning, action research and process management, and reviews of recent publications. It aims to be highly accessible for both readers and contributors. It is particularly accessible to practitioners.

Please send all contributions in Microsoft Word format by email (not a disk) to **alar@alara.net.au**

## *Guidelines*

ALARj is a journal (provided in PDF, with hard copies available) devoted to the communication of the theory and practice of action research and related methodologies generally. As with all ALARA activities, all streams of work are welcome in the journal including:

- action research
- action learning
- participatory action research
- systems thinking
- inquiry process-facilitation, and
- process management

and all the associated constructivist methods such as:

- rural self-appraisal
- auto-ethnography
- appreciative inquiry
- most significant change
- open space technology, etc.

### *Article preparation*

New and first-time contributors are particularly encouraged to submit articles. A short piece (approx 500 words) can be emailed to the Editor, outlining your submission, with a view to developing a full article through a mentoring process. One of our reviewers will be invited to work with you to shape your article.

Journal articles may use either Australian/UK or USA spelling and should use Harvard style referencing. Visit <http://www.library.uq.edu.au/training/citation/harvard.html> for examples.

### *Requirements*

Written contributions should contain:

- 1 ½ or double-spacing in all manuscripts, including references, notes, abstracts, quotations, figures and tables
- double quotation marks within single quotation marks to set off material that in the original source was enclosed in single quotation marks. Do not use quotation marks to enclose block quotations (any quotations of 40 or more words) and italicise block quotations
- Harvard style referencing
- maximum of 8000 words for peer reviewed articles and 2000 words for other journal items (including tables and figures)
- an abstract of 100-150 words
- six keywords for inclusion in metadata fields
- minimal use of headings (up to three is OK)
- any images or diagrams should be used to add value to the article and be independent from the document as either jpegs or gifs and inserted as image files into the page where possible. If using MS Word drawing tools, please 'group' your diagrams and images and anchor them to the page, or attach at the end of the document with a note in-text as to its position in the article.
- Note: if you are using photos of others you must have them give permission for the photos to be published. You should have written permission in these instances and forward such permission to the Editor.

On a cover sheet, please include contact information including full name, affiliation, email address, small photo (.jpeg or .gif) and brief biographical note.

- Please note: all correspondence will be directed to the lead author unless otherwise requested.

### *Peer review contributions*

All contributions for review should fit the following structure (only include those sections that are appropriate to your article):

- Title (concise and extended as required)
- Abstract and Keywords (100-150 words)
- Body of article – eg. introduction, background, literature review, main argument or research question, research methodology, research results, discussion, conclusions and future work (see formatting template)
- Useful links (if referring to weblinks, include these in full)
- Acknowledgements (about 100 words)
- Reference list (Harvard style)
- Appendices (use sparingly)
- Biographical notes of authors (up to 50 words)
- *Optional* small photo image of author(s) (.jpeg/ .jpg - no larger than 150 pixels)
- Please note: Those preferring a full peer review, must indicate as much to the editor at the commencement of writing, by email.

### *Editorial team*

ALARj is supported by a team of reviewers and is jointly published by ALARA Inc and Interchange and Prosperity Press. The ALARj publication is supported by the ALARA Publications Working Group, a team of ALARA members who share an interest in the development and progress of the journal and other ALARA publications.

### *Journal article review criteria*

The following criteria will be used by the Editorial review team to identify and manage the expectations of articles submitted for inclusion in the ALARj.

Articles submitted for inclusion in the journal should maintain an emphasis and focus of action research and action learning in such a way that promotes AR and AL as supported by ALARA members, and contributes to the literature more broadly.



Authors are sent a summary of reviewers' comments with which to refine their article.

The criteria are that articles submitted for inclusion in the ALARj:

- be both aimed at and grounded in the world of practice;
- be explicitly and actively participative: research with, for and by people rather than on people;
- draw on a wide range of ways of knowing (including intuitive, experiential, presentational as well as conceptual) and link these appropriately to form theory;
- address questions that are of significance to the flourishing of human community and the more-than-human world;
- aim to leave some lasting capacity amongst those involved, encompassing first, second and third person perspectives; and
- critically communicate the inquiry process instead of just presenting its results, and some reflections on it.

These overarching criteria should be considered together with the following questions:

- Is the article logical?
- Is it based on evidence? If so what kind?
- Does the article consider ethics?
- Has it considered the viewpoints of many stakeholders? Is it dialectical?
- Does the article consider the consequences for this generation and the next?
- Does it illustrate good practice in AR and AL?
- Does it progress AR and AL in the field (research, community, business, education or otherwise)?
- Does the writer present ideas with flare and creativity?
- Would the writer benefit from some mentoring to produce an article of journal-standard?