ALAR

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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.

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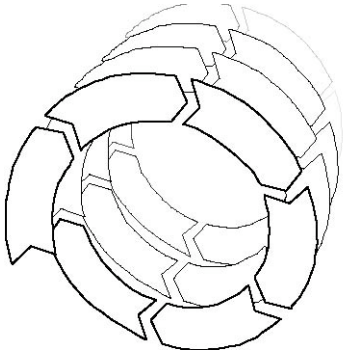

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Editorial

What does it mean to be whole? Is it a completeness? Being part of the 'big picture?' Is it knowing a sense of place, or belonging along with others? Or is it something more personal, more contemplative, so that as individuals we sense the world through our being and choose to take part in the performance of life?

The 2008 ALARA National Australian Conference, held in Canberra ACT in September, set up (open) spaces to engage in such questioning under the conference theme, 'the whole person: sustainable futures in living, learning, and working'. With the focus being on the *whole person*, this edition points to the second focal point of *sustainability*. Here in this special December edition of *ALARj*, we have attempted to capture not only the story of the conference as it ran over the two days, but also to sustain the conversations, activities, and learnings in which conference delegates engaged and consequently committed to writing for this edition.

You'll find words of reflection-on-process and conference planning review from Hill and myself, together with some on-the-ground 'emergings' from Goff and Genat as they speak from their roles at the conference as catalyst paper author and provocateur respectively. Sutcliffe, Sankaran *et al*, and Vaartjes and Goff each delve a little deeper into their open space workshops held at the conference to produce works reflective of their embodied experiences 'in place' as action researchers, practitioners, and learners.

We are what we write: an autoethnography, an elaborate description of interactions, a nourishing and nurturing personal and organisational reflection – inquiries into the AR

and AL fields manifested through the art of writing, the act of Self, and the technique of the practiced 'I'.

We write to remember: to (re)mind.

Margaret O'Connell
Managing Editor, *ALARj*

An un-conference

Margaret O'Connell and
Geof Hill

ALARA is the world's oldest professional association for Action Researchers and Action Learners. Established in 1991, it has hosted seven World Congresses and many national and regional Australian events to support practitioners and advance the action research and action learning fields both locally and globally.

Conference committees have driven each of the conferences, and the experiences of these people, particularly their experiences at other conferences, influence the form that any particular conference takes. Given the philosophical agenda behind action research and the ethos of action learning, it is not at all surprising that across the history of these conferences and congresses there has been a move to challenge the very premises of a conference.

The origins of conferencing, coupled with professionals coming together in communities of practice, dates back as far as the emergence of the guilds in the middle ages and is a centrepiece of the experiential learning movement emphasizing that professionals can learn from each other as distinct as from books.

ALARA 2008 Conference

The ALARA 2008 Conference started as an idea initiated by conference organising committee member Margaret O'Connell. The catalyst for her was a travelling open space conference held in New Zealand in 2006.

Bressen (n.d.: 7) describes what an open space event is all about:

> *Open Space is a method of organizing, in a relatively short amount of time, as many sessions as participants want to convene, on whatever topics they feel passionate about. (One hour is sufficient for hundreds of people to set up a full day's worth of sessions.) It is a structured but self-organizing process, and has been used successfully in settings across all sectors: business, community, political activism, etc. The core guideline is: "Take responsibility for what you love." Participants are encouraged to move on to a new group any time they are not teaching, learning, or otherwise adding or receiving value.*

Several elements of the NZ conference influenced Margaret's initiatives in designing the ALARA 2008 national conference.

- Participatory processes were much more hands on. Proactive engagement was encouraged,
- Whilst a core group managed the generative nature of the conference, each locale developed through the influences of those participating locally (i.e. activities and outcomes developed in Dunedin, were quite different to the activities and outcomes in Wellington, for example),
- The core group were seen more as facilitators or 'provocateurs' than outright keynote speakers or 'leaders'. The term provocateur is a shortened version of 'agent provocateur' which is taken from Grenfell's (2004: 3) description of French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu:

  > *Pierre Bourdieu, was known as an agent provocateur, or enfant terrible, someone who was ready to challenge established orthodoxies and incite action against the violence (both symbolic and real) of the world.*

- Activities and outcomes were shaped by the emergent needs and issues of participants and supported by facilitators,
- Emergent needs and issues were threaded through the two-week period to generate something of a 'narrative arc' in total (i.e. carried from each location by the core facilitators),
- Complexities were acknowledged and challenged 'in situ' rather than generalised or left to one side, and
- Practical logistics were cost effective, most aspects were provided in kind (e.g. venues, equipment) and thus seen as an 'investment' in the development of ideas, solutions, outcomes and prospective ongoing relationships/partnerships (i.e. a strong sense of the 'greater good', rather than a profit-making scheme/potential).

Joining the Conference Committee after the initial ideas had been germinated, Geof Hill's experiences had been influenced by the Wenger and Snyder (2000) notion of communities of practice. He had initiated the ALARA Brisbane Philosophy Cafés based on the ideas of community of practice, and in the following years through his own business, the Investigative Practitioner, continued the idea of Philosophy Cafés with series on Practice Based Research, Change Management, and Leadership.

In each of the Philosophy Cafés, the conversations were initiated by catalyst papers that had been circulated prior to the calling together of Café participants. Each catalyst paper was a one-page summary of a particular element of the theme of that series of Philosophy Cafés. Often the catalyst paper contained references to provide the provenance of the ideas contained in the catalyst. For example, in the Philosophy Café series on Leadership each catalyst paper explored a different type of leadership such as Servant Leadership or Visionary leadership, and made reference to

some of the key articles behind that particular approach. Once running, the philosophy café progressed in a very organic way with conversations ranging close to and away from the initial catalyst paper. At the end of each Café the notes from that Café were published as a record of the discussion, and finally the whole collection of notes were published in a Philosophy Café booklet.

With these experiences the nature of the ALARA conference 'speakers' unfolded and so the call for presenters included an invitation for potential presenters at the conference to write a catalyst paper.

Planning and Programming

One of the surprises in endeavouring to organise a conference, which has the appearance of spontaneity, is that this often takes more planning time. This is often the case with Open Space, that what appears to be ad hoc facilitation is usually the result of subtle and thought through interventions. There is a strong parallel to the emergence of the unstructured program in Early Childhood. There is a belief that unstructured programs take less planning where in fact it is the opposite that it often takes more energy as well as a change in philosophy to student/child centred thinking to achieve an unstructured program (Thian, 2006).

From Margaret's experiences in NZ, the running of an open space event requires a high level of commitment from the outset. So too, there is no one 'key' person (traditionally, the 'conference convener'), but a core of committed and highly engaged members, whose work it is to develop the broader engagement of others. One must also be comfortable with the prospect that not all will be known and understood from the outset – the outcomes may not be entirely obvious until after the event. This requires a high level of trust in the open space process to ensure ideas develop to a maturity that others can visualise as well.

Despite starting with an idea, part of the philosophy of Open Space involves responding to what is happening in the moment and this influenced the way in which the program took shape. As catalyst papers arrived and as potential presenters queried the nature of the catalyst paper, the program evolved into 16 catalyst paper authors and a number of people volunteering to be provocateurs. Several of the catalyst authors also volunteered to be provocateurs.

The program itself was drafted and redrafted to create 'open space' so that catalyst papers were presented and discussed on day one, with further discussion ensuing on day two, based on the flow of conversation and preferred directions indicated by conference participants. What was evident from the outset was the need to retain a clear understanding of the roles involved, that of the provocateurs, authors and session facilitators. Also, the participant role required some articulation so that conference-goers felt part of the open space process, taking responsibility for their own engagement, once the 'rules of engagement' were set. The presence of open space facilitators helped to establish these rules.

The ALARA website was used to articulate these roles and it also contained the 16 catalyst papers. The structure for the website was such that it aimed to encourage conversation before, during and following the conference, allowing for comments, questions and the wider engagement of ALARA members who did not attend the conference in person. This resulted in some of the revised catalyst papers forming part of this journal issue.

Altogether, this provided a continuum of engagement possible: from participant observer (in Geertz' (1973) ethnographic sense), to agent provocateur (in Bourdieu's sociological sense). Role clarity is a necessary factor in open space processes as it is often the case that needs cannot be

fully anticipated until they emerge in process. This can cause organisers and participants some discomfort and a sense of being disconnected or even disempowered. Being clear about the roles involved helps to maintain a sense of purpose, boundaries and that at least someone knows how to progress things along!

Considering Open Spaces for Action Research and Action Learning

How does the open space process fit with action research and action learning? What ensued during the conference was what could be called 'deep conversation,' based on what one evaluation respondent, a catalyst paper author, described as a "delightful mix of people and the creative approach to the development of ideas". There occurred some exploration of the action research field of practice, where participants as well as presenters called into question their own personal-professional action research and/or learning processes. As a result of the open space format, one respondent discovered "that others also have questions about AL and AR. That there is always uncertainty but [it] embodies so many qualities that I already step to practice." The same respondent also questioned how they might carry this learning into their daily life. Another respondent, a conference participant, found it a challenge to think about how to put AR and AL into action in their daily working life. Still another respondent called this the "sharing of AR and AL practice dilemmas." Another respondent noted the "depth of engagement" with others in exploring AR and AL issues as a highlight of the conference.

Following the conference, the catalyst paper authors were asked to comment on the open space initiative. One of the catalyst authors made the following comments.

> *As a catalyst paper presenter I appreciated this approach much more than the standard paper presentation. I have never found the standard paper presentation process all that stimulating but*

> *this process energised me and left me enthused and wanting to work in this way more. For me it fitted with the culture and principles of action learning/research. It removed some of the pressure of having a completed paper ready for presentation and also enabled a space where the question could be explored and developed. I also appreciated this structure because it I found it stimulated a lot more interaction and connection between the various participants and facilitated connections between ideas in papers e.g. During the conference I was able to begin drawing some connections between Susan Goff's paper on emergent knowing and my own which I would like to follow up.*
>
> -- *Robyn Lynn*

There exists an ongoing tension between the public good and the personal good, that is, how we balance our personal development with our engagement in our work and public, or community, lives. One respondent also perceived a degree of assumed or "insider" knowledge within the conference group. This is one aspect that can emerge with open space events, particularly when developed by a large interest group or field of professionals, who are often more likely to understand certain "rules of thumb" as well as the rules of engagement.

Open space processes support the 'public good', yet encourage – indeed, require - active engagement of individuals so they remain alert to the conversations so as to teach through them and learn from them, as Bresson (n.d.: 7) suggests. Further evaluation results include suggestions from participants and presenters to include individual or "time out" spaces in the program for personal self reflection, because "for some it's hard to sustain the extraverted mode," as one respondent put it.

In all, the Open Space movement values sharing and collaboration, quality above quantity, and the right for everyone to have a say and be heard. Judging from the

positive feedback about the conference, it would appear that the open space groundwork has been laid for the ALARA 2009 national conference.

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A tale of two conferences

Geof Hill
The Investigative Practitioner

Action learning arises as much from serendipitous events as from formal channels. This is the case in my involvement in two conferences in 2008 both of which had articulated goals to reduce carbon footprints. In this paper, I make comparisons between the two conferences in an effort to identify some key strategic pathways for conferences generally to reduce carbon footprints and the ALARA conference specifically.

Introduction

In 2008 I was invited to be part of the organising committee for the Action Research Action Learning Association (ALARA) annual national conference held in Canberra in September. In accepting the invitation I made it clear that I had a refereed paper accepted for the International Inquiry into Pedagogy (iPED) Conference to be held in Coventry, UK, at the same time, and that this would prevent my actually attending the ALARA conference.

Two conferences

The ALARA Conference is held annually in different Australian cities to advance understanding of action research and action learning. The iPED Conference has been held in Coventry for the past three years to advance the notion of pedagogy in university teaching. Both conferences have agendas for reduction in carbon footprints. They adopted such strategies as using web sites as the central focal point for conference communication, lodging conference proposals through electronic portals on these web sites and encouraging participants to refer to the web site for answers to their questions about the conference.

Both conferences sought to have some of the program presented virtually in real time. In the planning stages for the ALARA conference we received a proposal for a catalyst paper (the mode of delivery at that conference) to be presented virtually at the conference via Learning Times™ making use of the chat room function and Skype™ links to facilitate discussion. This would have allowed the presenter to show 'slides' on the whiteboard section of Learning Times™ and speak to those slides using text chat facility and telephone chat facility. The presentation would have required a presentation moderator to be present in the actual conference to facilitate participants engaging with the web-based delivery. Two weeks before the conference, with absence of registered virtual participants, the paper was withdrawn. There was a fear that the technology required to envision this idea was too great an expense when there were so few virtual participants.

For the iPED conference, the virtual element of the conference involved a web link up with a speaker in Canada and delivery of his talk accompanied by PowerPoint™ slides which were driven by a moderator (the strand chair) at the conference. The speaker could see the audience through the reverse web cam and could respond to questions from the audience which when asked were repeated into the microphone/telephone by the strand chair.

The iPED conference was named "Researching Academic Vision and Reality" and, in that funny quirk of fate, that is exactly what was happening with the ALARA conference as it planned for and sadly was unable to constitute a virtual presentation. That is not to say that the iPED virtual element was successful. In fact in its flaws I believe it provides insights, at least to me, about such inclusions in conference programs.

The iPED conference offered Stephen Downes from the Institute for Information Technology, New Brunswick Canada, via a Skype™ video link in real time (I made an assumption that the session was scheduled in the afternoon so that he could be broadcasting at his Canadian facility at a suitable time). He wore what appeared to be a blue tooth microphone so that he could speak to the slides and presumably look at the web cam view of the audience. The audience were also recorded using a web cam pointed at the audience. At the conference the stream chair moved through a set of PowerPoint™ slides on the prompting from Stephen. At the end of the session there were questions from the audience.

The quality of speech through Skype™ was tainted and sometimes gave the appearance of a speech impediment, as we would loose parts of words. The web cam limited the speaker's view of the audience and at times it appeared that he was oblivious to the audience. It made for a very static delivery. At one point, as time seemed to be running out, the chair sent an email message to him to advise that he needed time to answer questions.

Asking questions was difficult and we found that it was necessary for the chair to repeat questions so that the presenter could clearly hear them. In my opinion it would have been better to have written the question so that the formulating of the question served to clarify exactly what the question was that was being asked.

Learning

In my role as member of the organising committee for the ALARA conference, and with an established agenda for the ALARA conferences to embrace more carbon reducing strategies, the juxtaposition of the paper that did not get presented (the ALARA one) and the paper that did get presented (the iPED one) provided room for contemplation

about action steps for ALARA in planning their next conference.

The first important realisation is that if you want to have a virtual element of a conference program you need to be planning for that from the beginning. This, I believe gives a preparedness for negotiating placement of the presentation if and when a participant and or conference delegates choose the virtual option. In this regard I applaud the ALARA committee for contemplating a virtual element as, even though it did not eventuate, the space was there and will probably eventuate in future conferences.

This brings a second point to mind; that addressing a virtual element of the conference is a bigger picture than just the conference. Technology must be thought of as integral to everything the organization does rather than as an add-on. ALARA has started addressing this by encouraging the use of its web site. The more this site is used the more there will be a member clientele who are used to attending an ALARA function online.

Implications for ALARA

There are two sorts of implications that arise for me out of my reflection on the comparisons between the two conferences. The first involves reviewing the status quo, while the second explores some opportunities for growth.

As ALARA has progressed with its 2008 conference one of the basic assumptions was that members and potential conference delegates were making use of the web site. Some of the policy decisions concerning the conference were also intended to increase web site usage. This is a core belief in moving towards a reduced carbon footprint conference, that a large portion of members are using the web site, particularly when this is presented as the predominant

vehicle for conference communication. This status quo needs to be affirmed and future action needs to be grounded on assurance that the innovation of the web site into this organisation is in fact changing the *modus operandi* of the membership and that they are making use of this as the principal knowledge source about the organisation.

Given an established clientele making use of the web site, a future action is to grow membership usage by offering a range of events through the web site. This not only verifies the viability of web delivered elements of a future conference it also increases the number of members who are using the web facility.

For example: The paper that was offered at the conference as a virtual paper could be offered as a web based event to both check the viability of presenting an event using Skype™ and Learning Times™ and to build the engaged membership. It could be offered in the same way as the local action research communities offer events, by circulating an email flyer and inviting participation. This would both gauge the current web usage, and help to trial the use of Learning Times™ and Skype™ as an online presentation method.

Some of the workshops offered in real time in the various state based member organisations could similarly be broadcast live through the web to other states.

Conclusion

Having worked for several years on the implementation of ICT to teachers in Brisbane I am of the strong belief that small supported steps brings about changes in culture and I believe that such small steps would build up to provide not only an increase in the number of virtual conference offerings for the 2009 conference but a membership base that is used to engaging with ALARA on the web site and thus

see a virtual conference as engaging as the face-to-face variation.

About the author

Dr Geof Hill is the Principal Consultant of the Investigative Practitioner. He has been engaged as a research coach with a number of community action research projects and has also been working with several universities providing pedagogical professional development for academic staff. He is currently working with a Queensland University that, as a result of their Accreditation Assessment, has a change management brief to get staff talking and writing about their academic (pedagogic) practices.

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Emergent knowing: reflections on a conference catalyst paper and workshop

Susan Goff

Even now, some months after the event, I am holding the sense of knowing I had that afternoon on the first day of the conference. We were in one of the meeting rooms in the old building, the recollection of the light is dim – that shadowy, cool, silhouetted look of later afternoon interiors when the day is bright outside. There were about eight of us I guess, honestly, I can't remember – but what I so clearly remember is the sense of holding reflective silence together at the end of the session.

It is not only about the silence, but something about its texture. It felt, and still feels, silky, still, warm and almost weighty. It feels silvery, mercurial. It was in my mind and whole body, the tips of my fingers, my core.

My intention had been to understand some more about what "emergent knowing" is. I refer to my facilitation practice as working "emergently" and I know that many facilitators share something of this language. For me, it is about starting at some level of knowing which serves as foundational. For some this might be building relationships between people, or a question, for me it is about values. Starting with a an open page, and working to these group-devised (indigenous) ideas, I then unfold collective knowing using a variety of

reflective, reflexive methods as negotiated with the participants in the moment of developing insights. The outcome is unknown, but the process of getting there seems fluent, effortless and timely in a palpable sense. However, as fellow practitioners will know, finding the opportunity to work this way is rare.

So I wanted to go beyond the limitations of contracted work in this session, to see what we could find together about the actual "coming to know" that seems to be the quality of "mindful movement" that happens when we work emergently. Rather than focussing our coming to know *content* - as we might in a commissioned research workshop - I was more interested in creating content to be a reflective surface for coming to know *ways of coming to know*. I apologise for the double looping here, but this is my intent and ALARA conferences are one of the few places we can visit where we can explore our field without commercial or academic restraint.

I find this question of coming to know eternally difficult to communicate with any real sense of meaning or relevance, even though I know how crucially important it is. When we ask: "how do we know" too easily we default to the answers of evidence (data, "seeing is believing") logic or authority ("because the experts tell us") - all of which I understand to be the signals of positivism. To really depart from this embedded, positivist ontology, we need other pathways into other ways of knowing. It is when we experience these other ways first hand that the fearsome language of "epistemology" and "ontology" can become embodied sensation before they are confined to language. The problem I have in communicating the meaning of ontology and epistemology is that for most of us it is language before it is experience.

Turning to our catalyst workshop, and as I recall, we began in a silent reflection, just breathing out the busy-ness of the conference, and letting each others' presences be felt. I really was not sure what would happen next, and it was only in that silence that the thought came to me: to introduce a phrase that would open some door into the questions of how we know.

"I know the sea".

As my words broke the silence there were some surprised, questioning expressions. I repeated the phrase and paused. Then I reflected out loud on how I know the sea – as wet, cold, tugging embodied knowing; as story; as imagined images from life experiences… And a round of reflections came into being; each person describing how they know the sea. We had some charcoal and paper, so some of us drew patterns, one of us sung a song while showing us an image on his lap top, another reflected on not knowing the sea directly but through other sources. It was gentle, personal, richly diverse.

At the conclusion of the round, as I now recall, there was some more silence. I invited us to remember all those descriptions we had shared as if they were verbal barriers or end points of the thought that brought each of us to the moment of expressing how we know the sea. "Looking", imagining, feeling back into the movement that led up to the words we had expressed, we held silence again, feeling together perhaps the way we had come into "knowing" from the deeper space of not knowing. It is there, in that moment of collectively looking into the movement of coming to know, that the original silvered, weighty, smooth memory lingers on for me.

I am committed to these questions of how we know, as awkward and ineffable as they are. I believe that the times we are living into are in a large way a consequence of how we know: a way of knowing that is reflective of the fragmentation that objectivity creates and that is losing the organic, tacit ways of knowing that perhaps we once had. I am interested to experience how we can be in this way of knowing, even if only in glimpses. As with green corridors enabling wild creatures to move across landscapes, perhaps we can let our wilder, more innate knowings travel across the connections and uninterrupted flows of knowing that may be possible.

I am not sure where it would lead to: perhaps there is some reason we left this way of knowing if what we are doing is rekindling something that is lost. Perhaps this is not so. Perhaps I am being nostalgic searching for something lost rather than recognising the wasteland we are in. Perhaps it is not a wasteland but an extraordinary leap of sensate understanding that is unique to Now: our thought interacting with other contemporary elements such as electronic networks and global governance systems.

Except that we are not unfamiliar with the idea of "one-ness" with nature as life's experience of the sublime – this desire to connect is not new. Perhaps this little glimpse we shared at the workshop was breathing some oxygen into being human qualities of today's expression of Nature. I remain deeply grateful to those who entered this place with me. I want to revisit it, and see what might happen should we find that we can interact at the moment before thought is articulated. As Walt Whitman said: "Society waits unformed and is between things ended and things begun" (Walt Whitman, *Thoughts. 1)*.

About the author

Dr Susan Goff researches, designs and facilitates participatory approaches to knowledge generation in the interests of whole system sustainability. Following 20 years heading her own participatory research and evaluation consultancy and delivering guest lectures at Australian and British Universities, she has successfully completed her PhD and is now Senior Consultant at Twyfords, specialists in stakeholder and community engagement.

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Embodying the transformative practitioner: wholeness, subjectivity and representation

Bill Genat

This paper is an autoethnographic account of the 2008 Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) Conference. The account engages a number of themes central to the practice of participatory action research (PAR) as they emerged from a range of conference presentations. These include practitioner subjectivity, wholeness in relationship, meaning-making, embodied knowing and performative representation. The paper explores the implications of these practices for participatory action research with its particular emphasis on social transformation. The narrative of the paper is structured around some key moments in the development of a participatory action research project: arriving, engaging, evoking, knowing, gathering and representing. The intent of the paper is to provide a (partial) record of the conference and its emergent themes as a basis for further practitioner reflection.

Arriving: warm-up for the whole practitioner

The conference begins as I cosy into the back seat of the taxi on the way to the airport. The sidelight wraps me in a cone of light, a capsule, a rare retreat space as we whisk through the grey dawn of early morning Melbourne. I settle into my book and once again an old saw of a question hovers in the background, "How do we re-present the local knowledge, the peculiar meanings and evocative descriptions that our participants confabulate - those who join us in the strange and wonderful explorations we co-create in our role as participatory action researchers?" Or, as my interlocutor sharing the space of my taxi capsule inquires, "How do we have an impact on knowing in the midst of the hyperreal?"

(Denzin 2005). I glance out the window. We speed by the anxious city, the massive advertising billboards demanding our attention to embrace someone else's dream.

At the initial plenary session, I feel warmed by the sight of familiar faces. The welcome to country is heartfelt and resonant. Aunty Agnes shares the blessing, "Tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that's why we call it the present . . . our welcome is to protect you travelling in our country and to protect the gift of the welcome." The tribute to Professor Orlando Fals Borda is poignant and uplifting. Yoland transports us to Colombia and into the ritual, ceremonies, singing, folk-dancing, political, clerical and academic tributes that were offered in celebration and commemoration of Professor Orlando's life. I feel the sustenance, radiance and blessings of a life well-lived. A life that both stood in its own ground and joined with others to challenge injustice. My own mentors, friends, guides and inspirational fellow-travellers arise in awareness, those beings inseparable from myself whose gifts - wisdom, skills, honesty and commitment shape my own being. We share the moment together.

The conference theme is "The Whole Person: Sustainable futures in living, learning and working." What is that which is whole, I wonder? That which is holy? That which is healthy? The etymological ground co-exists. Can we bring it to the practice? Already, at the very beginning of the gathering, I feel my own being expanding, extending way beyond what is defined by a single individual person sitting in a meeting hall. Past and future are present within this being in the chair. They exist together in this gift we call the present through connection to myriad others who have nudged, shaped and added some other facet to being. What is the nature of being and how do we know it? Is it the experience of being? Is being only known through the experience of being? And, what is the nature of experience?

Joan Scott's paper arises to memory, "it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott 1992: 26). So, what constitutes wholeness in terms of the subjectivity of the practitioner? How, when, and in what circumstances?

The initial plenary session ends with morning tea. Reconnecting with colleagues from the past – a felt sense of warmth, familiarity, ongoing connection. Brief introductions to colleagues of colleagues – a warm hello, tentative hope, perhaps an actual connection in the future? There are too many people, too many conversations, an excited anticipation. What will the meeting bring?

Within the role of a participatory action research (PAR) practitioner, inasmuch as we seek to establish a small collective with whom to work in our projects, a "participant focus group" (Genat *forthcoming*) that operates as a sub-set of the "critical reference group" (Wadsworth 1997), our arriving in the midst of any collective has its similarities. Which facet of being will be projected early in our encounters to encourage participants with sufficient interest to engage with us in an inquiry or exploration over the long-term? We know when we begin to meet potential participants in local projects that only some will join and stay for the whole journey. Upon getting to know our local colleagues through time, there will be some with whom the 'I', the being manifesting an array of traits across a sequence of close encounters, establishes a rapport. Other potential participants will not take up the invitation of an ongoing relationship. Can they distinguish our self-conception as a whole person amidst manifestation of an array of traits, the myriad facets of being? Or is what we value as wholeness something more about the quality of relationship both with the multiple facets of our own being and the equally multiple manifestations of those with whom we work?

The first of the concurrent sessions is about to begin. An attraction to both what is known and the warmth of familiarity prompts me to go and sit in on a session with an old colleague I've not seen for some years with whom previously I engaged many an action research adventure.

Engaging: connecting up the living system

Ross talks of his work with Landcare groups, local people who wish to nurture the bounty of the earth, ensuring their local landscape is productive and sustainable. Lately, recognition is growing of the public good and benefit provided by these mostly local farmers. While there is an emerging discourse in the halls of government about "landholder's responsibilities," there is also talk of paying farmers for their contribution to sustaining clean water, fresh air and biodiversity. The local people have seen and been through much together. The history of some of these groups goes back twenty years.

While the locals stay focused together, other actors - agriculture, water and environmental public servants move from one position to another on the endless carousel of the public service leaving corporate memory in their wake. The locals, long interconnected through time and space have their own established governance structures. They know the country and have both the organisational structures and governance capacity to make a difference. However, the public servants have little understanding and respect for these folk, stakeholders with 'lay' knowledges from outside government who claim they can make a difference. Within the Landcare group a lot of energy is expended upon bitching about the situation. Ross supports the locals in their inquiry about their place in the system and how they might make a difference. He wonders how he can get the whole system including bureaucrats, land-carers and others working together?

Ross finds himself getting very involved with the land-carers. He immerses himself in the passionate world of community-led change. More of him is becoming engaged. He casts aside the detached professional facilitator persona and feels himself alive to the struggle, the fire in the belly. He experiences the activist within emerging. The participants are animated. He feels joined with the Landcarers in their struggle. He shares his opinion; leads their interest. The Landcarers begin to feel an awareness of their power. Together, they know the country. Together, they know the possibilities. Local knowledge *can* make a difference.

Ross responds not only to the outer process of the group, but also to his own inner arisings and the nub of what is emergent in the group. He speaks *as* the consciousness and *to* the consciousness of the group. He pushes to point out the emergent possibilities for a change in the consciousness of the whole system. He feels in touch with the local system and its inter-connectedness to the broader land management system. As facilitator, he becomes an organelle for the autopoeisis (see below) of the local system.

Initially in engaging with any small collective or participant focus group, as practitioners we aspire to connect local people more fully, who wish to embark together on the journey of participatory inquiry. As participant, more often than not, this evokes the wondrous discovery that I am not alone. Like us, other local people are touched by similar experiences, have similar aspirations. As facilitators, merely convening a "third-space" (Bhaba 1995: 208) where people can come and share their stories and aspirations creates a possibility to incubate a new living system. We aspire to nurture it as an autopoietic entity – a system that is self-organising and sustaining of its own autonomous existence (Maturana & Varela 1987: 46). Upon establishing and building its own identity, its internal set of relationships, this

system can explore its interconnection with other parts of the larger system and begin to influence these environments.

Still, Ross wonders how these Landcare groups who have built their identity on the basis of local collective action, sympathetic passion and shared stories, who possess intimate and powerful local knowledge about their environment, how can this knowledge be moved through and taken up in the broader system to permeate bureaucratic and administrative cultures? How do we influence policy without getting into a fight? While the advice to "find the people you can work with" may work on an ad hoc basis, how do we transmit and inculcate both local knowledge and respect for local knowledge in the corridors of power to strengthen sustainable capacity within the system?

My early morning interlocutor speaks to me again, "How *do* we have an impact on knowing in the midst of the hyperreal?"

Evoking: relationship and meaning

I find myself drawn to Jacques' concurrent session. Again, he and I have some history of relationship. I know of his wonderfully diverse background in participatory community projects in Europe, America and in Australia. What has he in store for this session? He begins in Europe; in 1915 with Joseph Cardijn a catholic priest who, in the tradition of the primitive communists of the 1830s, invited young workers and trade unionists to reflect about the situation they founds themselves in and "to see, to judge and to act" – a project also happening in the protestant churches of the period. Jacques transports us back, before the arising of the instrumentalist sociology of the 1930s and its obsession with utilitarianism, to Mauss (1923/1990) and the mystery of the gift, of reciprocity. Its message of how society exists as systems of reciprocal relationships, each a mystery in itself.

Whither an interest in reciprocity and the sacredness of relationship within contemporary sociology?

Jacques asks to what extent do we examine experiences of alienation in our own PAR practice? How is the inability to establish relationship present within the experience of either ourselves or those with whom we practice? How is the centrality of relationship and its presence or absence in the lives of our participants informing contemporary social theory?

Jacques unpacks taken for granted glosses that undervalue reciprocity and the gift in contemporary society. He cites the example of volunteerism being framed as "unpaid work" and volunteers themselves explaining their actions as, "I want to give back to the community." What is it that you have taken? Are societal relationships only about utilitarian exchanges?

Jacques invokes Jacob Moreno's work with prostitutes in 1930s Germany lauding the profound connect between action methods and theory in the context of everyday life. He highlights the centrality of personal relationship, both inner and outer, and an explicit theory of social being that pervades Moreno's work (see Moreno 1953). At mention of Moreno, I am taken away to practice of his method in a role-training exercise with Aboriginal Health Workers in the central desert town of Wiluna. Facilitating rehearsals . . . *imagine* . . . *act* . . . *reflect* . . . what role can we evoke that will be effective conducting research interviews about social problems associated with alcohol consumption in households where the people being interviewed might well be imbibing? Trust is the basis of relationship that enables the health workers to work with both each other and me. The system of relationships within the health worker group is alive and engaged.

Lively respectful relationships within the participant focus group provide the foundation for a healthy (wholy, holy) human living system and, progressively, the development of unique shared meanings and powerful local knowledges. As facilitators, it is the building of trust, reciprocity and openness in relationships with and between our collaborators in the participant focus group that opens the possibilities of sharing and bringing some depth to the unique and peculiar meanings we all bring to our local world. Within the to and fro of collaborative action and reflection, within the debates and contestation, new shared insights and celebrations of meaningful, collective ways of renaming the world can emerge. In this way, this living system serves as an incubator of new discourse challenging taken for granted glosses and broader dominant discourses.

Jacques reminds us of the etymology of "participatory" – to be part of; partner – *partir:* "to hold part in". What is this, which we hold part in? As a participant, as an engaged , curious, generous sharer of experience, can we hold part in the wholeness and richness of our local group's shared lived experience, knowledge that might be critical to policy and programs for people in a similar situation. As a PAR practitioner, as a facilitator – someone who is able "to make things easier" – can we draw deeply on our wisdom and skills to support participants "to hold part in" the wholeness of this local system of interrelationship. And what about group think, where a distorted subjectivity dominates the group? Is not wholeness/healthiness of the broader system also a consideration? Are we able to also "hold part in" and bring challenge and question to the group.

We explore the etymology of "whole"; its old Old English roots: *hal*; entire, unhurt, healthy; holy, total, not lacking, complete, sacred. Martin Buber's "I and Thou" (1970) arises to awareness.

Knowing: beyond just the intellect

Belatedly, I enter Susie's session on knowing. How do we know what we know? How do we know about . . . water?

At once, I am tumbling, arcing, sliding, then weightless in the deep green water under the ocean surface off Fremantle, the sun through the waves casting lacy spider webs of light on the tidal corrugations of soft white sand, bubbling sounds in my ears. Then, I am lying in an isolated rocky cove on the damp brilliant sand the granules rough beneath my shoulder blades and elbows, the scent of seaweeds, the lapping of exhausted waves gently sliding around me, coming and going as I soak up the heat of the sun through the pores of my skin, the salty taste of sea on my lips. I lie on the sand in the heat, and the music of early avant-garde Sydney band Tully (1971), *Softly Softly* comes through to me, the languorous flute, the soporific bass like the heat haze of summer and Shayna (Karlin) Stewart's lilting lullaby rocking me gently with the lapping waves.

Knowing through seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, remembering, imagining. Whole knowing? Accepting and embracing consciously all arisings to awareness in the moment, the whole of my sensory and thinking being. Scoping the balance of the four functions: sensing, feeling, thinking and intuiting (Jung 1921/1971).

Gathering: weaving the knowings

A plenary at the end of the first day of the conference enables a sharing of emergent themes, a gathering of input from the first day.

Knowing? How do we bring our whole body of knowing to the practice, bring our senses into play, our intellect, our memory, our experience, out intuition; the wisdom others have evoked within us or bestowed upon us, our awesome

genetic knowing? Potentially, in this role we have as facilitator, animateur or provocateur within a small living system each of us is a vehicle for a micro hologram of this conscious planet coming to know itself more deeply. Using our negotiated power to pause the space and realise the power of the contemplative to manifest and infuse the work. Knowing the time to be silent.

Allowing the activist within to emerge. Coming into relationship not as a separate facilitator but becoming more engaged , practising non-separateness. Being with others in creating knowledge, tapping this whole living system and tapping deeply into personal experience, the wisdom and knowledge bequeathed by inner reflection. Getting to the nub of what is arising and engaging with passion, with heartfelt interest. Reading the wholeness of the group, the living system and allowing the depth to respond, weaving the threads of knowing in the group, speaking the consciousness of the group. We are more than we seem, we bring more than we know.

Still the question remains, how to we transmit the knowing, particularly lay knowledges of local people with their passion and the meaning they bring to the world. How do we go beyond just the textual representation of that and bring the whole body of knowing to other contexts, for example, the policy and administrative context. How do we facilitate, animate PAR processes so that knowledge moves through the system in a way where we have metaphors, we have imagery, we have representations of meaning that are bigger then just the text, more powerful than the standard form. How do we loosen up that structure particularly when people have stories of passion? How do we weave in the knowledge and rejuvenate, renew and refresh command and control systems from the inside, so that new ways of seeing and knowing can flourish in the corridors?

These and other emergent themes form the basis of the gatherings for day two.

Representing: performing the story

The next morning begins for me with exploring embodiment in our practice further, expanding reflections from the richness of what has gone before. As a practitioner, embodying all that we are, how do we stand connected within our own ground of being, sometimes within the very belly of the beast, and with confidence, moving from our knowing. And, how can we manufacture reflective and contemplative learning spaces within the process we create for our participants? Ah, fortunately we know that we have negotiated the power to manage both the process and the space. We are able to pause, rewind and forward, even to play with uncertainty.

And still the question, "How do we have an impact on knowing in the midst of the hyperreal?" How can we do transmission of the profound understandings of local people, unique local situated knowledges with their nuances of emotion, their allegorical and metaphorical embellishes, their resonant timbre and pitch, their colour and their playfulness without reducing their multidimensional nature to two-dimensional word-processed text on paper?

Helen and I convene a session clumsily entitled, "Performing Transmission." I dread to think what other conference participants who haven't been a part of the conversation will think this session is or isn't about. We map out the dimensions of the system on the whiteboard: the participant focus group as a sub-set of the critical reference group, other stakeholder groups and policy-makers and program developers.

Ortrun joins us. Ignoring the technology of the whiteboard she launches into storytelling. She shares her meeting earlier in the day with some government officers. She not only recounts a story of the meeting, but also her participants' stories. To enable us to see, she builds the picture of life in the villages - flimsy houses, rising dust, chopping wood, carrying water; we smell the cattle, the straw on the floor and the smoky fires; we hear the women singing and the shouts of children; we taste the home-cooked gruel and metal tang off the plate; we feel the hand-woven mats and the hard baked mud floor. Her voice rises and falls, speeds up and slows down, carries the emotion. Her hands paint pictures in the air. She embodies the story. We know she has been there. We know she cares. It evokes our own similar experiences; it evokes our own knowing.

While other dimensions would have been added to the transmission had her participants also met with the project funders, Ortrun's storytelling is an embodied performance. And, she knows it. And, being an elder of the circle of action research practitioners, she also has further wisdom to share. Her style of transmission in the corridors is not a private conversation. She talks with two policymakers at this meeting and strategically agrees to present a similar account to a group of policymakers in a couple of weeks. She sets the stage for yet another performance. However, this is an intervention that implicates the policymakers as a system. Not only in the first meeting has she made the interaction public, that is, inserted information into an open system beyond a dyad (Kelly & Sewell 1988: 62), but also her second meeting will insert the information in its multi-sensory modalities as a part of a micro government system beyond the single control of any single individual policymaker. Ortrun works the organisational culture.

I feel blessed by the elders.

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Using Systems Thinking to Explore Wicked Problems

Shankar Sankaran, Elyssebeth Leigh and Pamela Kruse

A catalyst paper was submitted to the National ALARA conference in Canberra titled 'Systems Thinking for Wicked Problems' to conduct a workshop to explore the use of soft systems methodology (SSM) to address a wicked problem. The authors would like to thank those who participated in the workshop as it turned out to be a rich action research-like exploration.

This paper will first explain what is meant by wicked problems. Second, it will compare Horst Rittel's reasons for identifying 'wicked problems' as opposed to 'tame problems' and Peter Checkland's development of 'soft systems thinking' as opposed to 'hard systems thinking'. It will then describe the process used at the workshop and the outcome of the exploration. The paper will end with some reflections on the use of SSM to deal with wicked problems.

Wicked Problems

The term wicked problems is attributed to Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber (1973) where they described such problems as societal problems that (urban) planners have to deal with. They distinguished these problems from 'tame problems' often dealt with by scientists and engineers that could be defined clearly and solutions found by established processes.

Rittel and Webber (1973: 160-167) attributed ten characteristics to wicked problems:

1. There is no definite formulation of the wicked problem. To understand a wicked problem one has to have some idea about how to solve it. So the

problem space and solution space cannot be separated.

2. Wicked problems have no stopping rule. Often it is unclear when the problem has been solved. The planner is often forced to find a solution due to other constraints placed on him/her such as time, money or patience.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad. Often wicked problems involve multiple stakeholders and their assessment of the solution could vary based on their interests.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test or solution to a wicked problem. Solutions often generate unintended consequences and the full impact of the solution cannot be ascertained until the repercussions are played out.
5. Every solution to a wicked problem is a 'one-shot operation'; because there is no opportunity to learn by trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly. Wicked problems are not conducive to trial runs to find better solutions.
6. Wicked problems do not have an enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan. It is impossible to prove that all solutions for the problem have been found and analyzed.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique. There are no classes of wicked problems to apply similar solutions.
8. Every wicked problem is considered to be a symptom of another problem. Therefore, it is best if they are addressed at as high a level as possible to avoid addressing symptoms rather than the problem.
9. The existence of discrepancies representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The 'worldviews' of people looking at the problems could be different and, therefore,

stakeholders may have a different understanding of what the problem really is.

10. The planners addressing wicked problems are liable for the consequences of the actions generated by them as these can greatly affect the lives of people who are touched by these actions.

Although Rittell and Webber's 1973 paper is often cited to describe wicked problems, Professor West Churchman (1967) refers to an earlier seminar when Horst Rittel also used the term 'wicked problems', adding that with wicked problems solutions often make the symptoms worse and it is morally wrong to try and tame a wicked problem.

While Rittel associated 'wicked problems' with urban planning, similar problems can be found in many other areas. A recent discussion paper published by the Australian Public Service (APS 2007) cites climate change, obesity, indigenous disadvantage and land degradation as some' wicked problems' that Australia is faced with. Van der Ween (2003) states that even strategy issues faced by organizations such as Walmart and telecommunication companies like KPN possess the characteristics of 'wicked problems'. Barrie and Fourie (2001) have dealt with issues related to property formalization as a wicked problem.

Techniques to address wicked problems

In an interview about methods that are useful to address wicked problems Rittel suggested the use of second-generation design methods to address these. He summarized the characteristics of second-generation design methodology as follows (Rittel 1984: 324-327).

1. Involving a number of participants to discover as much knowledge as possible about the situation as the expertise and ignorance about the problem is

distributed. An attempt should be made to develop a maximum amount of participation to gain as much knowledge as it is possible.
2. Using an argumentative structure in planning looking at pros and cons.
3. Looking at each issue as a symptom of another issue to move up the level at which the problem is addressed.
4. Exhibiting transparency in the process of argumentation about the wicked problem as each set of judgments depends on the understanding of the problem at the point where the argument is being made.
5. Using a principle of objectification to reduce the probability of missing something that could become important later on and also to explicitly state the fundamental objectives to stimulate discussion. This raises the probability of bringing out the important issues and generating divergent opinions and positions on them.
6. Controlling the delegated judgment by spelling out all assumptions that are being made.

He also advocated that the planner should take the role of a midwife or a teacher as opposed to someone who plans for others. In other words the planner had a responsibility to show others how they can plan for themselves.

To support the use of second-generation design methods, Rittel also developed a framework for argumentation called IBIS (Issue-based Information System) initially using a paper-based approach but later using computers to support argumentation. Based on these principles Computer Supported Argument Visualization (CSAV) software has been developed to enable stakeholders to address wicked problems. Examples of such CSAV's are Dialogue Mapping (Conklin 2005) and Compendium (Selvin *et al.* 2001).

Using Soft Systems Methodology

SSM which was developed by Peter Checkland and his associates to address ill-structured management problems has been used to address wicked problems (Barry and Fourie 2001) and the Institute of Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney (Palmer *et al*. 2007). Several accounts of how SSM has been applied to address ill-structured problems can be found in key books written about SSM (Checkland and Scholes 1990, Checkland and Holwell 1998, Wilson 1990). Jackson (2003: 202-207) offers a critique of SSM and its limitations.

SSM (Checkland 1999) was developed for reasons similar to why Rittel felt that a new generation of methods is required to address sets of problems that could not be solved using conventional methods used by scientists and engineers. SSM was developed when Checkland and his associates from Lancaster University found methods used in systems engineering were unsuitable to tackle ill-structured problems often faced by managers. They proposed that human activity systems need to be considered as 'soft systems' as opposed to 'hard systems'. They felt that the process used to resolve such problems needs to be systemic.

Similar to Rittel's view that wicked problems need multiple perspectives and a structured argumentation process, SSM encourages a debate among the stakeholders who have different perspectives of a problem to come up with a 'root definition' that makes the purpose of a system clearer. Rittel's use of the word 'societal systems' has similarities to the term 'human activity systems' used by Checkland.

Soft Systems Methodology at the workshop

At the ALARA conference workshop, a few processes used from SSM (Checkland and Poulter 2006) were utilized to address a wicked problem selected by the participants. Due

to limited time it was only possible to scratch the surface of the problem at the workshop.

Figure 1 shows the 'two strand' version of SSM that is often used in practice to explain the methods used at the workshop. Only the first three analytical aspects of the SSM methodology were used: The two-strand-version of SSM is based on the seven-step model that was originally developed by Checkland (1999) but adds social, cultural and political analysis of the issues being addressed.

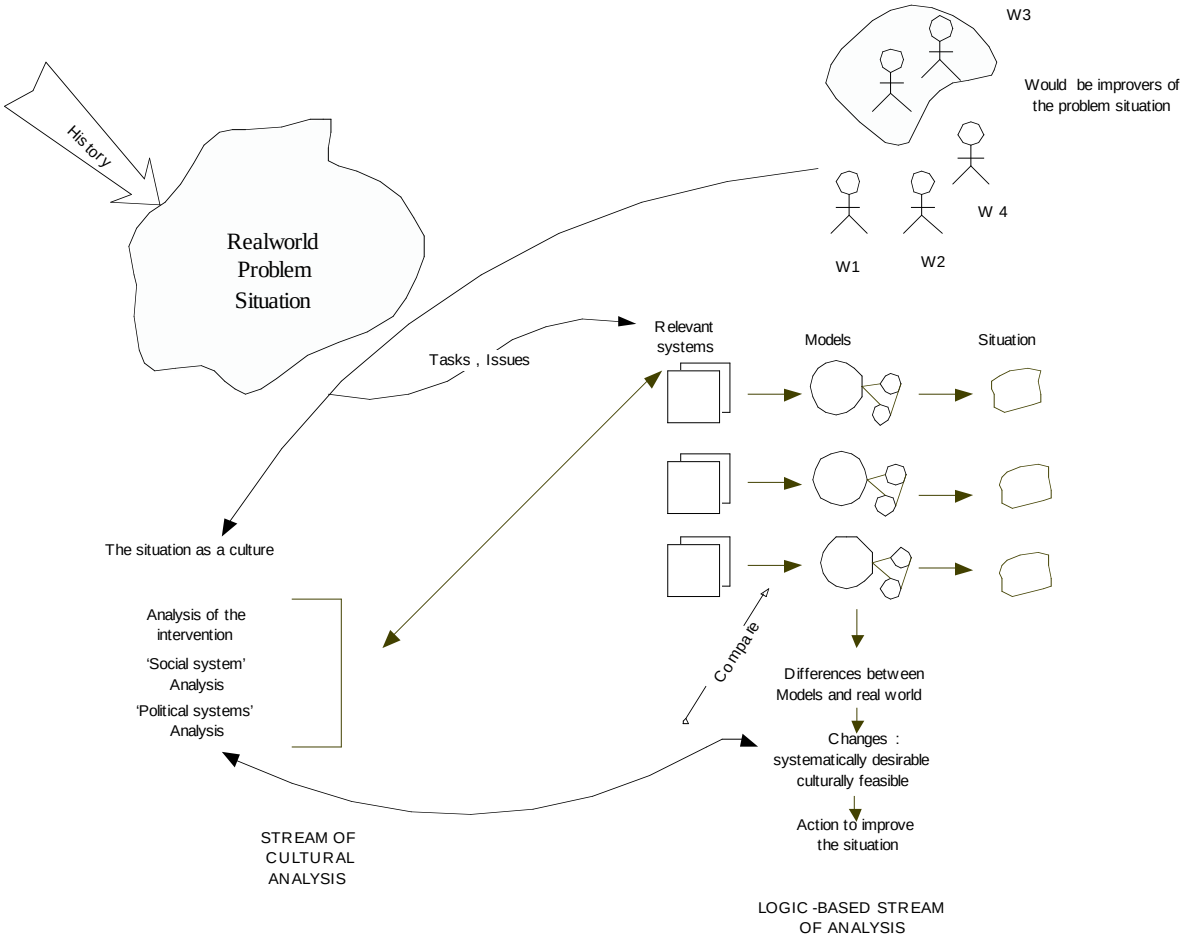

Figure 1. Two-strand version of SSM (Source: Jackson 2003: 189).

The steps used at the workshop were:

1. A short description of wicked problems was provided and the participants were then asked to choose a 'wicked problem' they would like to address.
2. Using a rich picture: the situation, as the participants experienced it, was captured informally.
3. A social analysis was carried out to get a sense of the social structure of the situation. The elements of the social analysis addressed were formal and informal roles, norms and values.
4. A political analysis was carried out to look at power structures in the situation.

The participants picked 'Caring for the elderly' as the wicked problem to be addressed, as this is an issue of general concern. There were six participants who chose to attend the workshop from the catalyst sessions at the conference. The workshop facilitator knew three of the participants and was aware that at least two of them were very experienced in using action research and systems thinking. The participants divided themselves into two groups after the facilitator explained what the two groups would be doing – one group would construct a rich picture of the situation while the other would conduct a social and political analysis. While the original plan for the workshop was to carry out the activities in sequence, they were carried out in parallel due to time constraints. After the groups had worked independently for nearly thirty minutes they were brought together to see what they might have missed in their analysis of the situation and then went back to work for some more time in their own groups.

The outcomes of the session was a 'rich picture' that started small and became quite informative and complex as participants creating the picture asked more questions of the situation. The social and political analysis took the form of a

'mind map; that showed various issues and their relationships. The conversation between the two groups in-between helped to add more details to the rich picture and the mind map. Due to time constraints, a short reflection session was held to evaluate the workshop.

Reflections

Prior to the conference, a catalyst paper was posted on the ALARA website (www.alara.net.au) and elicited some thoughtful discussions. The authors would like to thank those who responded to the catalyst paper.

Diane Allen linked wicked problems to Argyris and Schon's discussion on interpersonal relations. She also reflected on Acland's analysis of the sources of conflict and the discussion in the 1970's in Kiama about the effects of blue metal quarrying on the surrounding landscape. Margaret O'Connell was reminded of David Beckett's notion of 'hot action' in approaching complex issues and listed the reasons for linking them. Ross Colliver was interested to open up the way in which the multiple stakeholders define the problem differently at the workshop. Among those who posted discussions on the ALARA website, Ross Colliver participated in the workshop and Margaret O'Connell observed the process.

All the participants of the workshop session felt that the process used was beneficial to the discussion of ill-structured or wicked problems to clarify issues from several perspectives. However they felt that the time allocated to the workshop was quite short and more time was needed to fully evaluate the use of SSM. To the extent they used it, it was felt quite effective. One of the reasons why the 'rich pictures' exercise was so successful was the presence of Kate Reckord, who was very interested in using visual tools in her own teaching at the Canberra Institute of Technology. Since Kate was good at drawing she became the person who took

charge of drawing the rich picture and guiding others to add elements to it. The photo shows Kate's enthusiasm. She is the one on the table.

Figure 2. Participants in the 'wicked problems' workshop, 2008 ALARA National Australian Conference, Canberra ACT. Photo by Shankar Sankaran.

Feedback was sought from the participants by email after the workshop and only Pamela Kruse responded to the authors' email. She felt that the method of socio-drama (where people assume roles of stakeholders to portray real-life conflicts) could be very useful to address wicked problems. She felt that doing a rich picture exercise after warming up with a socio-drama session could be a useful addition to the process used at the workshop.

Conclusions

There are several similarities between what Rittel has advocated to address wicked problems and Checkland's use of SSM to deal with ill-structured problems.

As Rittel (1984) observed the definition of wicked problems needs discussion among people who have the required knowledge to contribute to the discussions. The authors would suggest that a careful stakeholder analysis be conducted to determine who will be invited to a discussion

on wicked problems. As all stakeholders may not be identified in the first instance a conscious effort should be made to invite additional stakeholders as and when it becomes evident that their contributions are required.

It was not possible to fully evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of using SSM to address wicked problems at the workshop mainly due to time limitations. Also the authors could not get comprehensive feedback after the workshop. However, to the extent it was used, it was found to be useful. It was felt that the presence of Bob Dick and Ross Colliver as participants and the inclusion of Kate Reckord to draw the rich picture might have made it look easy to use SSM. To judge the effectiveness of SSM in addressing wicked problems, a longer workshop with participants who may not be so familiar with participatory processes would be required.

As action researchers, who take on social responsibilities, we need to be aware of various methods and techniques used in addressing societal problems that are often wicked or ill-structured in nature. The workshop has demonstrated briefly that methodologies such as SSM could be useful in addressing wicked problems. The authors would like to encourage ALARA's action research community to collaborate on finding other methods of addressing wicked problems for the social good.

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Living Inquiry: Embodiment of Action Learning

Vicki Vaartjes and Susan Goff

Action Research enables researchers to interrogate the kind of knowledge that is used to know the research problem as an equal aspect of the problem itself. It is a trans-disciplinary research method being applied to any field of human endeavour while also regenerating such fields so that they may leave behind their traditional disciplinary features and boundaries. Currently Action Research is moving beyond its elementary use as a method or tool of research, to become a way of being for researchers, co-researchers and stakeholders alike as they sustain Action Research systems. These Action Research systems include our own bodies and a sense of knowing how we are in the world within our physical frame. Within this changing context, this paper draws on group work carried out during the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) National Conference in Canberra, Australia in 2008 and explores some of the ways in which the practice of Action Research develops the ontology of the researcher, and how the ontology of the researcher develops the field of Action Research.

Opening thoughts

One of the interesting things about Action Research is that the methodology positions the researcher roundly within rather than apart from the research. The deeply personal experience of the researcher, and the way in which the researcher adds meaning, interprets experience and conveys this in what they do and write are acknowledged as both subjective and valuable.

The implication of this is that the researcher brings their whole self to the research process – their history, their way of thinking, their capabilities, their emotions, their physicality - and this all plays into all aspects of the research process,

including the ability to yield lessons (Checkland 1992) and warrantable assertions (Dick 1997).

Action Research enables researchers to interrogate the kind of knowledge that is used to know the research problem as an equal aspect of the problem itself. It can work with a variety of knowledge types such as positivist, critical and constructivist, as well as a range of conceptual frameworks including participatory, meditative and rapid appraisal. It is a trans-disciplinary research method being applied to any field of human endeavour while also regenerating such fields so that they may leave behind their traditional disciplinary features and boundaries. Currently Action Research is moving beyond its elementary use as a method or tool of research, to become a way of being for researchers, co-researchers and stakeholders alike as they sustain Action Research systems within and beyond their physical and sensory frames.

Within this changing context, this paper represents a meta-reflection on the part of both authors, about our experience of this shifting field. We reflect within and between ourselves drawing on our experience as Action Researchers. We explored these ideas at the ALARA 2008 Australian conference through our catalyst papers, workshops and open space type group work. We referred to the mind maps from the group work to co-write this paper, which we developed through critical dialogue and in response to the journal's editorial panel's notes, for which we are very grateful.

It is through our eyes this paper explores some of the ways in which the practice of Action Research develops the ontology of the researcher. By this we mean that we experientially encounter Action Research ideas, language, qualities of relationships and shifts of tangible things that make up the evidence of the world as a flow of sensed, patterned and expressed transactions. This flow does much

more than progress a project: it shapes us into the world that we sense.

It is not our intent to provide a thorough analysis of the diverse literature on the subject, but to invite the reader to share a journey with us, which may provoke valuable questions about your own practices at an ontological level. To this end, at times the writing is purposefully metaphoric.

What we mean by "way of being" and "embodiment"

Way of being, or ontology, may be defined as "the metaphysical study of the nature of being and existence"[1]. That is, an inquiry into those more than physical qualities of life that somehow influence and can manifest as the physical. In the context of this paper ontology describes the way of being of the researcher: how the researcher presents to or 'shows up' in the world. We also reflect on the researcher's self aware sense of presence within Action Research moments and how this plays into perception and interpretation of experience – the source and manifestation of social action.

The ontology of the individual has particular relevance when wrapped into a constructivist view of reality: the way of being of individuals contributes to and is created by an understanding of reality that is produced through social influences rather than seen as something impervious to them (Guba & Lincoln 1990). A critical stance enables the researcher to be value-sensitive to the social influences embedded in the sense of reality being enunciated at any one moment. In this sense reality is not seen as something "out there", but is made of meaning created through socially

[1] Ontology. (n.d.). *WordNet® 3.0*. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/ontology

accountable interpretation: "we do not see how things are: we see them according to how we are" (Seiler, 2003: 31).

These ideas in part are founded on work emerging from the biology of cognition (Humberto Maturana, Francesco Varela, David Bohm and others) that suggest human perception and meaning making is limited to the capacities of the individual's nervous system, which in itself has been shaped through prior experience. These aspects of who we are co-evolve with our experience: we experience more or less as we become more or less perceiving of and engaged with experience. Our powers and sensitivities of perception and our ways of making meaning are how we create our own sense of what is "real". In this sense, the only way that we as human beings are truly capable of seeing the physical world is through our own nervous system. Seeing the conceptual world however is an interior experience.

When we draw this idea of the world being both intangible and interior as well as sensed physical and exterior into the context of Action Research, the researcher's whole system and subjective experience in and of the research action takes on a very particular value. Everyone's ways of being and how they show up to each other play into our experiencing, interpreting and action within our research context. What limiting or enabling beliefs about how we are, are embedded in our deeper ontology? What might we need to unlearn in order to open ourselves up more deeply to the experiences of Action Research?

As beings who understand mind to be within rather than separated from body, to understand the implications of ways of being with regard to Action Research practices is not simply a cognitive task, as our nervous systems exist throughout our whole body. Cunliffe (2002) suggests that one of the most significant catalysts for learning can be the emotional reaction we have to an experience. When we are

touched or struck by something we experience, our reaction is that of our nervous system: physical, cognitive, and emotional. This whole system response in a research environment which questions how we know as an equal aspect of the problem being inquired into means that the question of how we know is also an embodied question. We want to know what is this physical manifestation of the ontological as an embodied experience? What does it feel like? How does such a way of knowing our ways of being inform Action Research practice and its social value?

We may not be positioned to immediately make sense of what touches us, but in being touched something in us changes, which in turn affects our future perception and meaning making. "Learning may therefore be reframed as an embodied (whole body), responsive understanding" (Cunliffe 2002: 42). As Action Researchers, we the authors of this paper, step into this research as both part of and apart from the area of engagement (Checkland 1992). We surmise that experiences that arise from our practice of Action Research past and present, may lead to the possibility of embodied learning and deeper ontological shifts.

Sensing the world beyond: Embodying the demands of praxis

When considering how the practice of Action Research leads to deeper ontological shifts in the practitioner, we propose that the only embodied learning anyone can speak of with any authority is our own. Hence this part of the paper is given to an exploration of influence of the practice of Action Research on the ontology of the researcher drawing on both our direct experiences. Vicki's is a reflection of many years journeying into the Action Research field, and Susan's is within an Action Research moment in the Open Space workshop at the ALARA conference.

Vicki's Story

The first time I experienced Action Research, I stepped into applying the methodology without any real sense of what it means to be an Action Researcher. It was not that I lacked intellectual understanding of the approach and I had been able to well justify why it was a best fit for my context. It was more that I was unconscious of my unknowing when it came to the meaning that Action Research would have within me as a person and as a professional.

I first encountered Action Research in my search for an approach to sustainable organisational change – one that would deliver outcomes that were more significant and more lasting than we tended to experience. As a corporate manager, I was cognisant of the need to fulfil my role responsibilities in achieving strategic goals, but was also well aware of the risk introduced in implementation if I didn't take the time and effort to bring the organisation along on the journey. The underlying culture in our organisation seemed to be remarkably resilient and resistant to change. Action Research seemed to offer a methodology that was grounded in social change, that provided both inclusivity and rigour to how we would learn from and through the process of strategic change. Most of all, it meant that I could be as much a part of the change as anyone else: an "insider" Action Researcher.

The work undertaken and the outcomes and contributions associated with it are comprehensively reported in my doctoral dissertation (Vaartjes 2003). What is of more interest here is how the immersion that I experienced as a practitioner of Action Research process progressively increased my awareness of the ontological consequences for the researcher: in particular how little I really knew of inclusive and participatory practices.

My world until then had been the world of the physical scientist, and research had a positivist flavour where one's standpoint is as objective observer of the research action, where control is exerted over particular variables, and where significant effort is placed into being able to make defensible claims. This was my world, and the practice of Action Research immediately bumped up against it.

For example the shift from controlling to observing was a significant one that required new capabilities. In a similar way my early forays into reflective practice may at best be described as superficial and quite ineffective. I use the word "reflective" here in the sense described by Cunliffe (2002: 44) as "reflecting on situations from 'outside, and using explicit knowledge to explain actions." In terms that Argyris (1974) posited, I was travelling 'single loop' with my reflections, accepting as "given" a range of assumptions and making adjustments to the change process to accommodate those assumptions. This was safe – no 'undiscussable' or 'invisibilised' assumptions needed to be disturbed. The reflections were interesting, but that was all.

Transforming my learning practice to 'double loop' and questioning some of the fundamental assessments and assumptions I was making about what constituted appropriate action, led me to recognise the need to bring other voices into the work. In other words, my immersion in the challenges of Action Research practice, led to an emerging awareness of the value of diversity and participation: a growing awareness of some of the deeper underlying ethics implicit in the Action Research approach. Along with this realisation came questions about my own role: was I part of the problem, the solution or both? And if I was part of the problem was it really possible for me to be part of the solution when as a manager I might well be a stabilising agent in the system?

The experience of Action Research deeply challenged my sense of self, as a manager and researcher, and I reflected upon this in my dissertation (Vaartjes 2003) by identifying three key roles that I played in the process of change:

- Critical inquirer and commentator: I proactively questioned the processes and practices that were generally taken for granted within the workplace, and sought to share an understanding of the implications of such processes, positive and negative. This is the most risky orientation because of its overtly challenging nature, and the reality that in adopting such an orientation, one runs the risk of surfacing deeply emotional issues.
- Reflective observer: I needed to take time to 'stand back' from the group and observe the patterns and practices, and make sense of them by identifying key assumptions. In recognition of my complicity, this orientation included surfacing and seeking to understand my own assumptions. This is a less risky orientation when compared to the critical inquirer orientation, as it is more passive and draws on more cognitive processing.
- Responsible role model: In consideration of my role and status in the organisation, I needed to be oriented toward setting impeccable standards, and role-modelling preferred behaviours. This included meeting the obligations of my manager role. This orientation is the least risky of the three as it concerns modelling 'good' organisational behaviour and task focus.

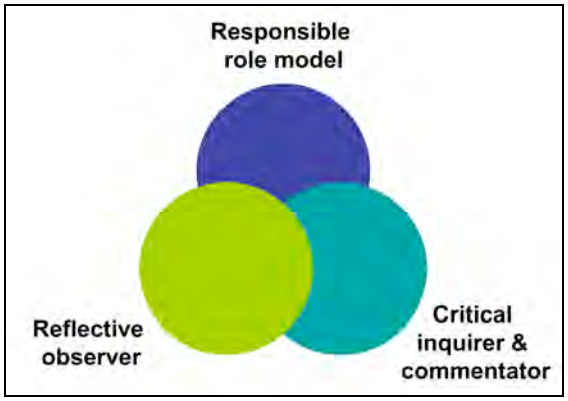

Figure 1. The three roles of an insider action-researcher (Vaartjes, 2003).

Reading now what I had written, I notice my language and the pervasiveness of my positivist past in the names that I gave to these roles: they all implicitly positioned me apart from the work, as someone capable of being external to the research. What I was really trying to describe was the meaning the work had on my way of being, but clearly the language is at odds. My body knew of the experience before I had the language to describe it. I now see this as an example of how the experience of Action Research is so heavily affected by how we interpret our experience, and our capacity to convert this into language.

Susan's Story

We had formed a small circle of chairs, facing the wall. There were about eight of us I guess. The wall had a large piece of butcher's paper with extensive branches and notes mapping our thoughts from the first hour of work. It was Day 2 of the conference, mid morning, and we had most of the large plenary room to ourselves. It was messy – chairs everywhere, people's bags, coats slung over them, bits of paper… you know the look.

My friend was standing. She had said "standing in the place of my knowing"[2] and I had asked her to stand so she could feel the physicality of her metaphor given we were discussing "embodied ontology". We have worked together professionally for nearly 20 years in action research, but others in the group did not know this. We continued the dialogue, mapping; I can't really remember what we talked about now. But I can still "see" her standing as we sat around her. People joined and left. Another colleague joined the circle and took in the scene.

He noted how terrible it was to make my friend stand – as if she was being sent to the head master for punishment. I was completely taken aback. This image had not occurred to my friend or me. However, now that it was mentioned, the meaning of this person standing in the circle seemed to transform from one of held inquiry to one of confusion. My female companion also admitted that she felt uncomfortable.

I wanted to say "no, its not like that" but realised that if it was like that for others, then to some degree it *was* like that whether I intended it or not. I held my silence about this question, just letting the recollections float and settle in the unspoken air between us all. My friend eventually sat down. The session moved on.

There was so much that was tilting – painful recollections, clashing frameworks of meaning, judgement and holding – it was so noisy in that metaphysical space. Yet I did not want to rescue myself or anyone else… I needed just to let the flow of thought continue and follow it into the physical world.

But, I was burning. No matter where the conversation went I was feeling shame and pain. So I stood up: "*I* want to stand

[2] Thank you Jane Fisher.

in the place of my knowing now," I said. After all, the strongest sense of embodied knowing I was experiencing was what was happening right now – as uncalled for as it was.

I stood and felt my weight settle, wondered if the burning sensation would continue. But it didn't. The group look calmly on, continuing the conversation… I still can't remember much about it – what I remember is standing there. Another friend asked: what is coming up for you now? I cannot promise if this is how it happened, but somehow I talked about the frustration I felt when people thought I was micro managing, when my whole desire is to support people to experience their own authority. Somehow I end up being seen as the utter contradiction of my intention, which I experience as my disempowered response (physical sensing) to oppression (the metaphysical) in the larger systems. However, when deadlines approach, like producing journals or conferences, then action has to happen and the buck stops etc, etc…

"What are you feeling now?" My friend asked again.

I passed my hand across my belly. There in my gut was this feeling of nausea, which was somehow related to shame. "Shame" I said. "Tell us more". The group was holding me, calm, respectful, gentle. I talked about the shame I felt when I lost the focus on my life and made it secondary to other people's purposes… I still did not know what to do about it – but realised again, that doing for others is always wrong even if deadlines have to be missed. "We wait until the spirit arrives"[3] someone said in another forum. It is better to act within the spirit of mutuality than time-bound insistence. The quality of action and inaction is different.

[3] Thank you Ian Hughes.

The conversation continued, moving onto other people's interests. I remained standing and let the intensity of shame cool and drop away. "It has left me now, I am going to sit down". On sitting I felt that the tilting and noisy metaphysical air had somehow settled. Another friend leaned towards me and said something like: thank you for that. This was profound; as we had somehow drifted apart, and this volunteered connection was warm indeed.

> *Working with shame involves confronting our own culpability and not 'fixing' people or deploying strategies that put distance between ourselves and others. Shame has to be addressed and held in the relationship.*
>
> *Shame modulates contact. When it is internalised people are not available for process and dialogue. Healing is therefore dependent on the restoration of an intersubjective field. In this sense, working dialogically is vital to working with shame* (Francis, Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac 2008).

The view from within: The ontology of the researcher

As previously described, the ALARA Australian Conference in Canberra provided an opportunity for a group of Action Research practitioners to reflect upon and explore the "embodiment of Action Research" during an open space style session. We were both coordinators of the discussion and participating in this group as others came and went.

It was clear from the start that we would only get so far if we treated it as merely an intellectual discussion. In a very real sense the interactions of the participants could be considered a clear manifestation of the role that the ontology of the researcher plays in perceiving and interpreting experiences. At the same time as we were talking about embodiment and exploring embodiment we were actually also embodying this experience and sharing our interpretations: it seemed clear that we could not explore the subject without actually

experiencing what we were talking about (in the phenomenological tradition).

Throughout the discussion, key ideas and key words were mind mapped to connect the ideas that built upon ideas and the experiences that catalysed reactions. After the event, the authors worked with the ideas, drew together some common themes, and proposed an interpretation of the map in terms of a natural system: a tree (refer Figure 2).

The branches of the tree represent each of five themes through which embodiment of Action Research may be understood: researcher as self; researcher as observer/reflexive learner; researcher as story teller; researcher as social being; and researcher as organic translation of energies. We go on to briefly explore these ways of being in Action Research and what they may manifest.

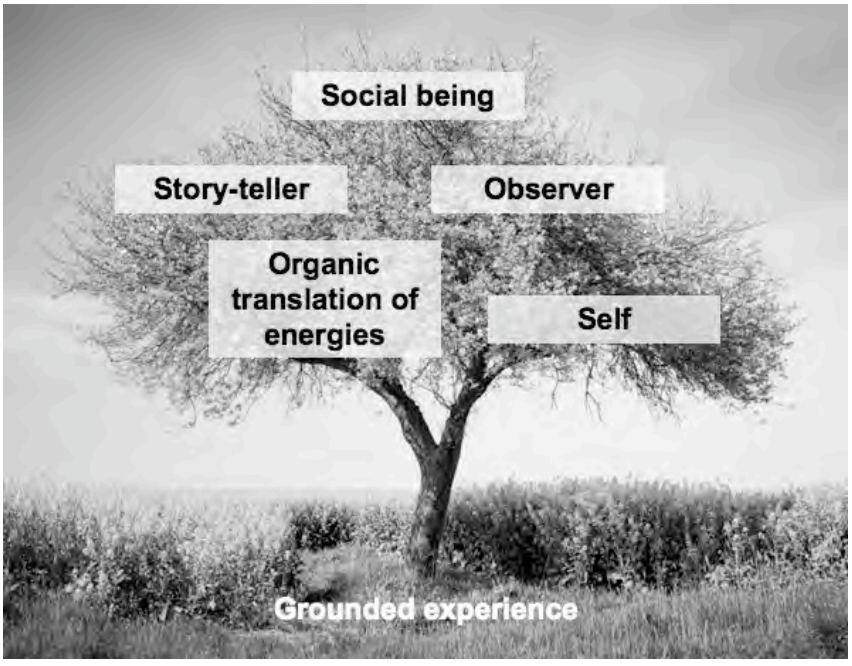

Figure 2. The tree: A natural systems metaphor for the embodiment of Action Research.

Researcher as self

Items from the ALARA conference mind map branch:

The self – complex beings – many selves – what do you feel when asked about the unknown – barrier between self and unknown – shame – challenges of authentic self – what you put aside – "I stand in the place of my knowing" – what we see/ hear – more silence – less telling what I know – more conscious questioning – making the authentic self visible

As already noted, we bring to the work our grounded and embodied experience of life, and when we enter into an Action Research situation, this imbues everything we do and every experience we have. We are naturally positioned to be only truly capable of seeing things through our own eyes. *"I stand in the place of my knowing"*.

Such "standing" introduces the potential for great frailty and flaw, and yet at the same time the potential for great richness, compassion and relevance. While it is our particular, individual place of knowing that is reflected in our Action Research practice it is the very particularity of it that speaks so intimately to others.

By stepping into research, literally, our bodies holding the whole architecture of knowing – from practice to ontology – we bring with us the diversity and complexity of our own selves. Our sense of self is both as the knower *and* that which is known (embodied, whole system, epistemology), within an ever-evolving sense of what this reflexive play amounts to as a way of being (embodied, ontology). As our work reaches more powerfully into difficult social realities this continual inner movement from what we sense to who is doing the sensing is a preoccupying constraint to all our research action. The risk is that we become narcissistic, drowning in self-preoccupation rather than finding self in the company of others, within the urgencies of critically

reflexive social action. Beyond the great array of criteria that we attend to, it is the sense of internal congruency of self that must be the ultimate author of this movement. Not self in isolation, but self as held with, holding with others in the moments of knowing that Action Research legitimises in the social world: *the restoration of the inter-subjective space* (Francis *et al.* 2008).

Researcher as observer: sensing expert

Items from the ALARA conference mind map branch:

Being an observer in the research process – the pressure of positivist views – risk of exposing self

Without any particular prompting, the human mind lives in a constant state of awareness of self, other and our environment. Although the emphasis of our observing may shift from self to others, others to environment, and back again, we live within a constant stream of self-distinguished data, all of which serves to inform us. It offers us the minute-by-minute opportunity to make sense of our world within the narrow frame of our perception and meaning-making and to respond accordingly to satisfy needs and address concerns.

As a researcher, we bring our capacities for observation. If we acknowledge the value of the researcher's subjective self then how might we think about the researcher as an "observer"?

Two interesting definitions[4] of the word highlight the tension that the observer introduces to Action Research:

[4] Observer. (n.d.). *WordNet® 3.0*. Retrieved October 30, 2008, from Dictionary.com website: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/observer

- a person who becomes aware (of things or events) through the senses
- an expert who observes and comments on something

The first is a description of the observer that fits well within Action Research in that it acknowledges the role that perception has in the process of observation. Sensing can be catalysed by external events, which in turn catalyse internal reactions and interpretations flowing into thought and action. In other words, observing is an embodied process.

At the same time, the observer of the second kind brings their own interests and frameworks of ideas to the research. They bring expertise in their own right, be they a professional researcher or a lay co-researcher of first hand experience of the issues being addressed. They bring a capacity to observe things that occur in the "area of action" from their particular location, its particularity creating distance and carrying with it the life story and learned frameworks that create the spaces between us. The observer therefore observes in a particular way, paying attention to specific things and this has implications for the research process: "How we are observing determines what we see as problems, what we see as possibilities and what we see as solutions" (Sieler 2003: 30).

The Action Researcher steps into the observer as sensor role and immediately reflexively reconstructs the very dynamic that they observe from their expertise-based standpoint. With this comes the potential for ignoring some data in favour of other data, or giving meaning to data in ways that are peculiar to our ways of being and knowing. We can do little else even when we are self-interrogating or sensing others' experiences and viewpoints that strongly challenge our own. The risk is that being in our inescapably distinctive standpoint allows us to observe and sense in a kind of moral vacuum, where we choose the relationship we want with

what is being observed, perhaps in a way that is most self serving or self devaluing. *Working dialogically is vital* (Francis *et al.* 2008).

Researcher as story teller

Items from the ALARA conference mind map branch:
Where do we sit – the story or narrative we bring – my story/ our story and the value of both – social situations – challenges of external voices – challenges of internal voices – entering into AL/AR ways of being with our internal critics – unified body-mind

Human beings live in language. We are natural story tellers, and much of our sense-making is tied up with the stories we tell ourselves. Many of our stories come from our early-interpreted experience, and some are sourced in a kind of collective unconscious that brings with it a cultural, familial and social perspective on reality. Of course there are also the more recent narratives borne of our grounded personal and professional experiences.

We bring our stories, including our Action Research stories, to our Action Research practice. The more voices involved in Action Research, the more narratives and the greater the potential for complexity. We introduce the possibility of divergence and challenge as we struggle to find and hold onto shared understanding. A problem once thought to be simple becomes more complex and wicked, with many possible points of view and many possible new questions and practical shifts.

Nonetheless, we carry our stories within us and they are what help us to make sense of this complexity. They are the deep language of interpretation, meaning and context. For this reason, our stories are worthy of being honoured. Action Researchers must make space and time for stories to be heard and honoured. And as the research creates the

possibility of social change so too are new narratives created – new stories about who we are and what we are about, individually and collectively. Along with decisions, stories are the most direct pathways by which the metaphysical flows into the physical. Where decisions incise and redirect the flow, narratives hold it as one, uninterrupted movement.

As Action Researchers the multiple voices and narratives of those involved in the work play into the "meta-level" of being – how we relate to Action Research practice, what our self identity is as an Action Researcher, why it is that we end up doing Action Research in the practice fields and economic sectors that we do. All of these aspects of self-knowledge, reflexivity and story telling continue to build very individualised framings of Action Research practice, which play into our methodologies and the quality of inquiry and outcome we generate. When Action Researchers get together, this flowing sequence of knowing constitutes our experiential, presentational, propositional and practical "field" (Heron 1996).

Researcher as a social being

Items from the ALARA conference mind map branch:

Selfishness to selflessness – self in relationship "social self" – sacrifice

Standing in the place of my knowing – "shame"

At its most fundamental level, Action Research promises to improve social conditions, but in very real ways, the approach also risks our social realities. The Action Researcher brings into social relationships an awareness of and willingness to question, "how we know". We ask legitimate questions that disturb the very system of which we are a part. It is not that we are experts in the question of knowing, but more so that in authentic co-researcher practice, we need to bring our own struggles into the inquiry

setting, and we need to be prepared to lay them out and make them visible to ourselves in the company of other selves.

In some settings, by merely being the one who asks the tough questions, we inadvertently position ourselves as individuals with "authority", a position which has no real legitimacy if we are truly looking to co-create new ways of knowing. Indeed there is no existing professional or social role that anyone can put a hat to, which gives the practitioner and their co-researchers the legitimacy to ask, explore and moreover co-create ways of knowing without "authority". Such a practice requires new uses of language, asking naïve or forbidden questions, seeing relationships hitherto unrecognised, all of which, in other settings, immediately mark the practitioner as an "outsider" even if a recognisable one. This positioning of the researcher by others, and or by the researcher, can generate the potential for tension and anxiety, which can in turn, lead to behaviours that act to minimise or otherwise personal and collective anxiety. However, unless we are prepared to step into this risky place of asking the questions that challenge legitimacy, we ironically risk imposing on others our implied legitimacy –recreating the seeds of authority that are found in the oppressive systems that much of research seeks to transform.

This is clearly a point of tension for Action Researchers. We purposefully step into the research context and ask questions of epistemology and ontology, and in doing so we immediately disturb the system of which we are a part. We wish to be a part of the unfolding questions whilst also being a part of the problem. As social beings we are no less affected by this tension than anyone around us, and the experience of incoherence or chaos that our authenticity can generate can make us less willing to step into a researcher role.

Researcher as organic translation of energies

Standing in the place of my not knowing
The weight of who I am detects the ground
They say trees grow from the air into the earth
My leafy fingers reach to your air of being with me
My shame filled trunk churning through the years on years I lost myself
In service to my purpose – was it yours also?
Did your purpose consume you too? Is yours also mine?
You hold me in your gaze as my head dives into the earth
You are still there
And gently, just by standing still, shame passes down[5]

As our ontological questions flourish, the Action Researcher is making another place to be in the world. Once we challenged conventions by doing our research with people rather than on them. Then we challenged assumptions about what constitutes knowledge given the rights of all those we do research with to be included in the knowing we create together. Now we are coming to understand that knowing is fluency – a flow from thoughtful body, into thoughtful action, into thoughtful interaction. This sense of flow utterly transforms the ideas of knowing, knowledge, practice, action and research, all of which are core to the practices of Action Research.

This raises some critical questions for us as practitioners. If we are no longer holders of knowledge about a subject or even a practice, and no longer even holders of a bounded space in which others do their learning, growing and doing, then how do we create a way of being that supports relationships to build collective wisdom? In what ways

[5] By Susan Goff, 3 November 2008

might the Action Researcher be a kind of "conduit" in this process, bringing together these "energies" and respectfully holding open a space and time where such wisdom can be shared?

Just as the tree represents a place where translation of energies occurs, so too the processes of translation and interpretation in Action Research have the power to transform. Perhaps the experience of the ALARA conference group is a real example of such transformation in action: energies and ideas formed in the process of inquiring into our own embodiment. They live on within us, and are now transformed into the ideas expressed in this paper.

Closing thoughts

If we are to grow beyond the idea that we can never really know each others' experiences, and actually stand in each others' places of their knowing, then by what means do we research with and through each other? Even if we had an answer to this question, the ongoing challenge is that with each new initiative, each new moment this relational quality of being is in flux, and continually open to at least two-way dynamics.

Action Research is bound to a commitment to improve social conditions. Is it possible to improve social conditions by *being* am improving social condition, rather than being a researcher that is participating in improvement strategies? Can a researcher do such a thing within the researcher's own terms and within the relationships that hold us?

At a fundamental systems level, Action Research changes the way we think about ourselves, how we collectively see our broader system and what we know in terms of how outcomes are generated and perceived. The experience of this flows into our deepest sense of self and has the potential

to reshape and shift our ways of being, the shape of the world we see, and the relationships we have with those around us.

There is great power in this experience, and it carries with it considerable personal risk. Anyone who has the courage to step into an Action Researcher role will benefit greatly from the support that may be offered by co-researchers and collaborators as our experience so clearly illustrated. Indeed the giving and receiving of this support may well be the architecture of practice being an improving social condition.

Will shifting practice from doing to being, be the essential elemental contribution that Action Researchers create so that what is flowing through us heals us all, reshapes itself within/without us, and moves on into the lives of others? Is this our consuming purpose in the world that we now see?

Perhaps our Action Research challenge is to make the practice generative: seeds unfolding knowledge trees, in a vast forest of healing.

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About the authors

Dr Vicki Vaartjes is a director of Twyfords, a NSW based company who specialise in stakeholder and community engagement. She first encountered action research as an approach to organisational change while working as a corporate manager and completed her doctorate using this approach. Vicki integrates action learning and action research into her coaching and development of leaders and professionals.

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Dr Susan Goff researches, designs and facilitates participatory approaches to knowledge generation in the interests of whole system sustainability. Following 20 years heading her own participatory research and evaluation consultancy and delivering guest lectures at Australian and British Universities, she is now a Senior Consultant at Twyfords.

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VET Pedagogy: What does it mean in our amorphous VET environment?

Sarah Sutcliffe

The current Vocational Education and Training (VET) environment is subject to a plethora of divergent requirements and influences. These include:

- *higher retention rates in school or VET,*
- *450,000 new training places,*
- *higher level VET qualifications,*
- *Trade Centres in Schools,*
- *welfare-to-work training,*
- *emphasis on work-based training,*
- *increasing industry focus,*
- *User Choice, and*
- *business, rather than educative, framework.*

Where does the VET teacher fit? What does VET pedagogy mean in this multitude of contexts? What does effective VET pedagogy look like? These questions are part of a research project in which the author is involved with Roslin Brennan Kemmis of Charles Sturt University.

The author discussed these questions with conference participants, at the 2008 ALARA conference, under the theme of sustainability and the encroachment of economic rationalist approaches on our educational institutions. As the author is a relatively new VET researcher and this project is in its infancy, she appreciated the stimulation of provocateurs to 'incite, agitate and consolidate' discussion on this topic.

Introduction

This paper is based on a discussion with a small group of participants at the ALARA Conference held at the Canberra Institute of Technology in September 2008. The participants engaged in an exploration of what VET pedagogy meant to them from their diverse perspectives: as VET teachers from science, child care, nursing, design and communication backgrounds; as teachers of VET teachers; as curriculum developers; and as e-learning specialists. The discussion was

wide ranging and this paper attempts to capture some of the issues raised.

As the participants discussed what VET pedagogy meant to them, two broad ideas kept emerging: education and business. These two broad ideas dominated the content of the discussion but appeared in three different guises:

- as separate blocks of meaning,
- as tensions that contradicted and contrasted, and
- as drivers and forces of influence.

Separate blocks of meaning

Education

Learning was discussed in terms of the many contexts in which it sits. The participants discussed how learning could be passive, formal and informal, learner centred, situated/project-based or problem-based depending on the context. Learning could also be individual and/or group.

The discussion also centred on the diversity of the learner particularly in terms of age. The mature aged learner with their wealth of life experience had different needs to learners in their youth who operated in a 'Gen Y' mode. The learner was also recognised as being a worker engaged in learning as a student as well as a worker. The learner was discussed holistically, as an individual who engaged in the learning process, but who also needed support in order to build their capacity to learn.

There was a broad ranging discussion concerning the responsibilities of the teacher in terms of 'doing the right thing' for the learners. This included ensuring students had access to a depth of knowledge in their learning not just a superficial 'tick and flick' approach. This depth of

knowledge and a wish to develop in their learners an understanding of the 'why' of the content, not just the 'how', also related to quality control. The participants emphasised the importance of quality control and an adherence to best practise and felt that this was also part of the teacher's responsibility. Although it was acknowledged that the teaching was vocational (i.e. intended for the workplace), it was not automatically assumed that the workplace always demonstrated best practice; or that the workplace, with its eye on profit margins and 'getting the job done', necessarily had the interests of pedagogy as a priority. Geof Hawke raises this point in an article in the *Campus Review*. Although his discussion is more closely related to training policy and curriculum, he points out that industry groups "are so focused on immediate concerns they can't put them aside to discuss the broader public interest," let alone issues around depth of knowledge, and best practice (Hawke 2007).

The learner was perceived holistically and the role of the teacher was to consider a learner's well being as an individual and as part of a larger social structure not just as a learner attending a class to achieve a competency. This emphasis on doing the right thing for learners, doing more than the bare minimum and valuing their teaching beyond the classroom is also found in the writing of Kemmis and Smith (2007).

> *Educational praxis is purposive action – right educational conduct – which is guided by a moral purpose greater than the purpose of producing (just any) learning….praxis has the greater moral purpose of also bringing about the self-development of each individual learner in her or his interests and for the good of humankind.*

Business

The participants discussed the idea of business and its connection to their understanding of VET pedagogy. They identified the value of teaching and learning in the

workplace. There was an acknowledgement of the action learning, practice driven learning and project-based learning that takes place in the world of business. But also that this learning required reflection so that the learner was able to step back from the workplace and think about the work as learning, not just as work. Hawke (2008) discusses this point by stating that:

> *…there are many aspects of vocational learning that are best achieved outside the pressured, results-oriented workplace. This especially includes those areas of learning that involve underpinning knowledge and critical reflection on practice.*

There was also discussion about the VET guild enculturation, the idea of 'being the plumber'. As Down puts it 'learning to be, not just skills, more an enculturation, becoming part of a community of practice' (Down 2007). Hawke (2008) also talks about this idea of enculturation, learning 'to be' as an immersion in the field of practice:

> *No program of vocational learning that does not involve the learner in the actual practice of the work can develop full occupational capability.*

Tensions

Across these two ideas: education and business, there were tensions that the group felt needed resolution. The following chart captures some of what was discussed.

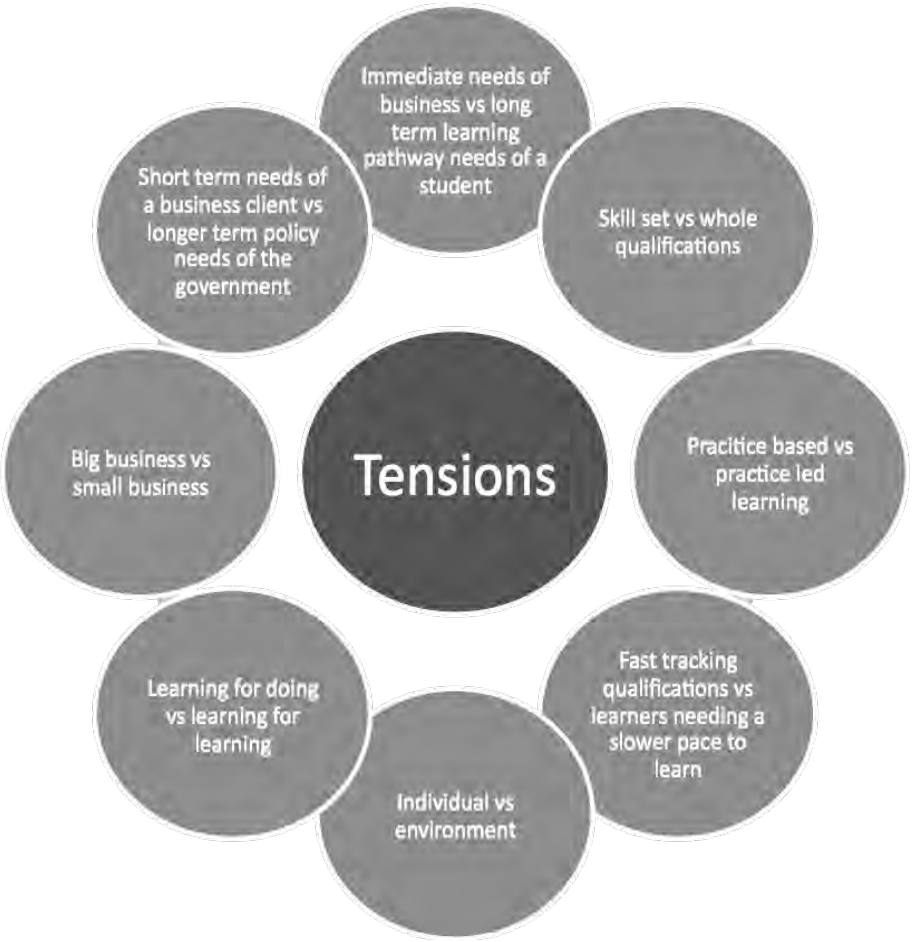

Figure 1. Tensions between education and business.

The group thought that a new paradigm for VET pedagogy needed to be created in order to address these sometimes counter-productive tensions. Brennan Kemmis (2008) described these tensions as 'dyads of tension', extremes along a continuum. In their *Future Now* report, Guthrie, Perkins & Nguyen (2006) point out the skills and knowledge VET practitioners will need to meet the challenges of the VET environment. They include:

- a sophisticated pedagogical repertoire,
- more learner-centred, work-centred and attribute-focused approaches, rather than traditional transmission pedagogies,
- an ability to work with multiple clients, in multiple contexts and across multiple learning sites, and

- understanding that the integration of learning and work is a major feature of the contemporary work environment.

Although these points are not a new paradigm in themselves, they capture the breadth of what will be necessary to develop one.

Drivers

The participants also identified a variety of drivers that add further dimensions to the education and business ideas. These include:

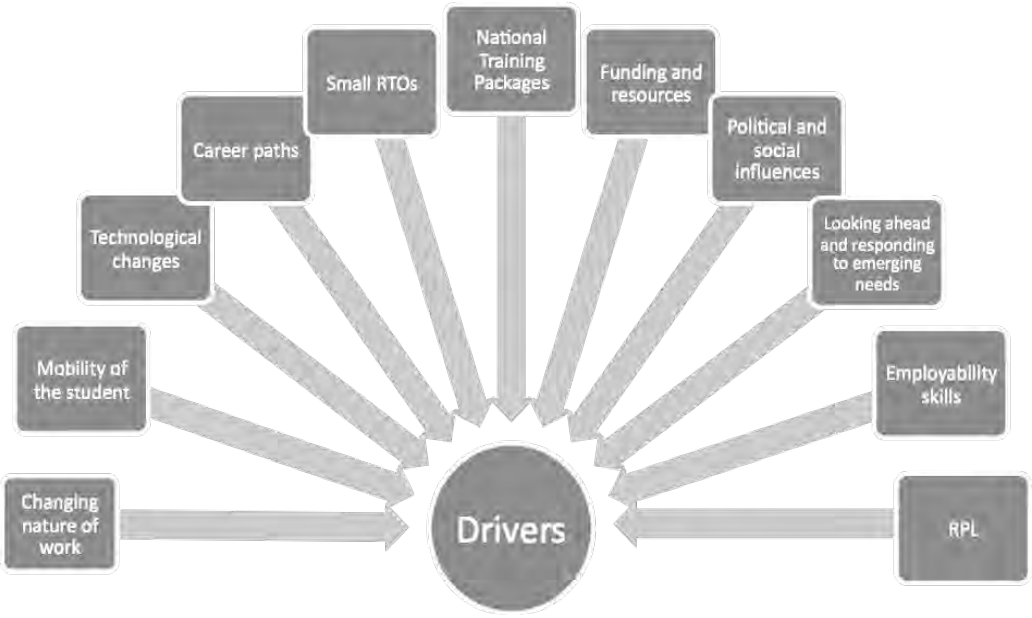

Figure 2. Drivers of education and business.

These drivers add another level of complexity for those who have a stake in the VET environment. Brennan Kemmis (2007) refers to this complexity in terms of the effect it has on practitioners.

> *The complexity of the interlocking systems controlling the VET sector is not necessarily badly intentioned but the functional*

> *effects are that practitioners are swamped by the bureaucratic and the mechanistic.*

It could be argued that this effect encompasses all who take part in the VET environment. These drivers have the capacity to influence those involved in the VET sector to an even greater depth, as Guthrie *et al.* (2006) point out, 'affecting the make up of the student cohort, client expectations and provider relationships with industry clients and other institutions, particularly schools.'

Conclusion

It could be argued that the essence of VET pedagogy is the juxtaposition of the two ideas: education and business and the tensions, drivers and meanings that are embedded in each as separate ideas as well as how they interact with each other.

Any discussion of VET pedagogy has to acknowledge these tensions and drivers as they exist in the very terminology. Vocational training with its emphasis on skills, knowing how to do something in the workplace, implies an inherently external purpose, an extrinsic value. Pedagogy, on the other hand, is about teaching and learning, learning how to learn and think, thinking about the whole person and their place in society; quite an internal process with intrinsic value. Kemmis and Smith (2007, ch.2: 3) also discuss this mix; the teacher having craft knowledge, the vocational knowledge, as well as the educational knowledge.

> *The teacher who wants to act educationally may require* techne *as craft knowledge about how to bring about learning, but aims to do something more, namely, to educate the learner in their own interests and for the good of human kind.*

VET pedagogy is then the juxtaposition of the ideas of education and business. The tensions and conflicts between

them are inherent. How well those tensions and conflicts are worked through: the education and business ideas; the intrinsic and the extrinsic values will decide its success. VET pedagogy that works is the craft or the art of successfully managing the tensions and conflicts that make up this complex idiom.

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About the author

Sarah has been working as a Research Officer with CIT Research at the Canberra Institute of Technology since 2004. Prior to this, Sarah taught in the VET sector for nine years across Certificate III and Graduate Certificate levels. Her research interests include: practitioner research, youth and Indigenous VET, recognition, and the quality of teaching and workplace practice. Examples of her work can be found at http://www.cit.act.edu.au/about/centres/education_excellence/research/

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Life Membership Award
Yoland Wadsworth

Yoland Wadsworth:

> *…to be sceptical of current dogma and to have the courage of our convictions to advocate and retain a critical reference group perspective even in the face of any pressures to abandon it. -- Wadsworth, 1991, p.11,* Everyday Evaluation on the Run.

Yoland first came across Participatory Action Research (PAR) in London around 1972, when she met people using it in the City Polytechnic. At around this time the Chief Health Officer of the Victorian Health Department wrote to her to ask her to come back to evaluate the first early childhood services program (at Knox). Yoland said, "I will if I can do it as participatory action research" – and spent the next three years finding out what that meant. She became involved with the community, engaging others in the observation, and starting to build a collaborative model of evaluation.

The then Head of the Department of Health called this 'subjective impressionistic biased rubbish', leading Yoland to enrol for her PhD in the philosophy of science, the focus of which was to understand what was methodologically good research that would be helpful to people. An outcome of this was the authorship of *Do it Yourself Social Research*, many editions of which have been published since then.

Yoland was the first research sociologist to work with the State Government, pioneering participatory action research in Victoria in the seventies. During that time she led a number of workshops that significantly influenced many others to see themselves as, and to become action researchers

– and to change and enrich their life philosophy in the course of doing so.

Yoland's contribution to tertiary education through her research and teaching is acknowledged by many, in and beyond the human services/community sector. With Yoland's guidance, a modified participatory action approach was used in the 1980s to ascertain the social and community services training needs for TAFE in Victoria. One of many important outcomes of this research was the provision by TAFE of the community development course, participatory action research being a core component of the curriculum. The number of former students whose lives have been changed through participation in this course is inestimable.

Over the years, Yoland has worked tirelessly in her own time to build, lead and coordinate organisations of and for grass-roots action researchers, especially in Melbourne, Victoria: the Action Research Issues Association (ARIA) and the Action Research Issues Centre, at Ross House in Flinders Lane, which began in 1988 and now has its home in the Borderlands Co-operative in the St Augustine Centre in Hawthorn. More recently Yoland was instrumental in setting up SPIRAL, the 'Systemic- Participatory – Inquiry – Research – Action Learning' network, which currently meets about four times a year, at Melbourne University. Yoland helped to set up the Action Learning Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) Association, was president for several years, and now continues to be an active member of ALARA.

In the course of countless workshops, seminars, formal and informal meetings, retreats and dinners, she has fomented a lively action research culture, in which ideas are shared and debated, friendships formed, and action research projects, in all their diversity, have been encouraged and celebrated. Her

books and articles have educated a generation of action researchers and we await with excitement the publication of her latest book, which we believe is about action research and the theory of everything.

Lynette Hawkins and Jill Sanguinetti

September 9, 2008

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Wadsworth, Y 1991, *Everyday Evaluation on the Run*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW.

Lynette and Jill nominated Yoland for the ALARA Life Membership Award which was presented to Yoland at the 2008 ALARA National Australian Conference in Canberra, ACT, September 11 and 12, 2008.

ALARA membership information and subscription forms

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The ALAR Journal can be obtained by joining the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) Inc. Your membership subscription entitles you to copies of the ALAR Journal (2 issues per year).

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ALARA organisational membership

ALARA is also keen to make the connections between people and activities in all the strands, streams and variants associated with our paradigm – including action learning, action research, process management, collaborative inquiry facilitation, systems thinking, organisational learning and development, for example, and with people who are working in any kind of organisational, community, workplace or other practice setting; and at all levels.

To this end we invite organisational memberships – as Affiliates or Associates of ALARA.

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Affiliate and Associate organisations pay the same modest membership subscription as an individual member and for that they will receive:

- The voting rights of a single member; Member discounts for one person (probably a hard-working office-bearer);
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- The right to a link from the ALARA website <http://www.alara.net.au> to your website if you have one. Our new website allows your organisation to write its own descriptive paragraph to go with its link;
- Occasional emails from ALARA about events or activities or resources that you may like to send on to your whole membership.
- Members of organisations who become ALARA Affiliates or Associates may also chose to become an individual member of ALARA for 40% the normal cost (so they can still belong to other more local and specialist professional organisations also). We believe this provides an attractive cost and labour free benefit that your organisation can offer to its own members;
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Email		*Mobile*

Please send mail to: ❑ *Home* ❑ *Work*

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Position / Job Title		*Organisation*
Address		
		Postcode
Town / City	*State*	*Nation*
Work contact numbers	*Phone*	*Fax*
Email		*Mobile*

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- ❑ Action Research
- ❑ Community Action/Dev
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- ❑ Environment/Sustainability
- ❑ Evaluation
- ❑ Facilitation of AR, AL, etc.
- ❑ Gender Issues
- ❑ Government
- ❑ Higher Education
- ❑ Human Services (Health)
- ❑ Learning Organisations
- ❑ Other

_____
Please specify

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- ❑ PAR
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- ❑ Quality Management
- ❑ Rural/Agriculture
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- ❑ Teacher Development
- ❑ Team Learning and Dev
- ❑ Vocational Education/HR

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Organisation name			*If incorporated*
Contact address			
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Town / City		*State*	*Nation*
A/H contact numbers	*Phone*		*Fax*
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Contact person / Please send mail attention to: _____

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Please say if your organisation is an Association, Society, Group, Network, Collective, Informal/Community, Set, Department, Business, Institute, Centre, Library or other configuration.			
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- ❑ Facilitation of AR, AL, etc.
- ❑ Gender Issues
- ❑ Government
- ❑ Higher Education
- ❑ Human Services (Health)
- ❑ Learning Organisations
- ❑ Other

_____
Please specify

- ❑ Manager and Leadership Dev
- ❑ Methodology/Methods
- ❑ Org Change and Dev
- ❑ PAR
- ❑ Process Management
- ❑ Quality Management
- ❑ Rural/Agriculture
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- ❑ Teacher Development
- ❑ Team Learning and Dev
- ❑ Vocational Education/HR

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?

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JOURNAL SUBMISSIONS 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.

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

and all the associated constructivist methods such as:

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- auto-ethnography
- appreciative inquiry
- most significant change
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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?

Upon final submission, authors are asked to sign an Agreement to Publish. For this, and more information about ALARA's publications, please visit http://www.alara.net.au/publications.