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Action learning and action research journal

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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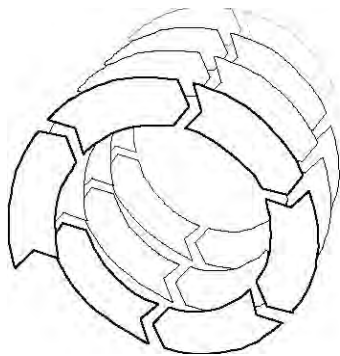
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Editorial

Tensions and reflections echo through this edition. Our lead article nobly captures the tensions action researchers must face and action research must address if it is to remain 'true' to its methods and intentions.

Our second article is written by a new researcher forging her action learning experiences in the warm fires of the ALARA network.

This leads to our reflective pieces sparked by conversation, activity and reflection at and following the 2009 ALARA Conference, held in Melbourne: Goff's piece highlights her soft touch to inquiry with a powerful dip into our humanness, while Borrell, Lane and Bickmore all respectively create a pathway for the learning of others, by inviting us to explore with them in their own learning.

And finally, an introduction (but to many a well known and much cherished individual): Alan Rayner is one of our Keynote speakers at the 2010 World Congress to be held this September in Melbourne. In his essay, Alan invites us to explore the notion of inclusionality and our tendencies to put a lid on our suffering as a 'negative growth' experience, when it is in fact a key part to our natural humanness and vitality.

Alan is currently a Reader in Biology at the University of Bath, England. He also produces and exhibits colourful oil paintings that reflect his scientific knowledge and sense of rapport with the natural world, as well as the abuses to

which this world can be subjected by human efforts to master it. A Founder of Bath Bio*Art*, he co-organized an International Science-Art event, The Language of Water, in Bath in Spring 2001. He is a Foundation Member of the Matran School, an International School For Cross-Disciplinary Creativity, and regularly communicates about 'inclusionality' with a small internet 'sharing circle'[1].

Alan will support the first Congress theme around our philosophical underpinnings of action-based, social change oriented and participatory approaches to research and learning, and ask the question, is there a common and united philosophical basis across the various applied fields? For more about this theme and others, see the World Congress website at

http://www.alara.net.au/worldcongress/2010/objectives.

These pieces all inspire one to write; to seek an answer however small or messy, to write with heart, with mind and with soul – all of which makes us human. And, with nature, we continue along the river. And on it flows.

Margaret O'Connell
Managing Editor, *ALARj*

Please note that our lead article in this edition is a reprint from the previous ALARj edition (October 2009), whereby the article was titled 'Tensions in action research'. *It was originally misprinted in the October 2009 edition. Please update any references to this article. My sincerest apologies to the authors for this oversight.*

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1 Extracted from the University of Bath website: http://people.bath.ac.uk/bssadmr/index.htm.

Tensions in emancipatory action research

Kim Polistina and Sevasti-Melissa Nolas

This article explores personal and professional tensions that we experienced during attempts to perform emancipatory action research (EAR). These include tensions between the worlds of the academe and action research contexts, difficulties with maintaining a sense of purpose, problems with giving voice to a diversity of worldviews through inappropriate and inadequate research methods and struggling with establishing a dialogue with participants that may enable empowerment. Reflecting on our early action research experience we note that much writing on action research does not correspond with experiences in the field - the research 'field' is far more complex, contradictory, messy and unpredictable. By discussing our research tensions we wish to draw attention to apparent gaps in researcher training and guidance and barriers and issues that may prevent emancipatory action research from reaching its ambitious aims.

Introduction

This article explores personal and professional tensions experienced by researchers during the performance of action research (AR). Tensions that arise through research and related group processes are the subject of much methodological writing. However, the personal and professional tensions faced by the researcher in implementing action research are less discussed. We write as researchers engaging with action research in two different research contexts and argue that there is still some way to go in developing a process that can explore and eventually better support action researchers on both a personal and professional level through their action research projects.

Action research is diverse in its origins, intentions and applications. A common point of reference for action researchers, however, is the desire to create a more socially responsive social science, to actively engage with the world-at-large and to help bring about constructive change in diverse settings (Reason & Bradbury 2001). While action research is diverse, the authors of this paper share this common point of reference.

We work at the critical theorist end of the methodological spectrum, engaging with marginalised groups and utilising forms of action research with emancipatory aims (Kemmis & McTaggart 2000). As researchers, we see the use of emancipatory action research (EAR) as a tool for non-alienating communication and interaction that attempts to support what Habermas has termed basic human interest of rational autonomy and freedom[2] (Carr & Kemmis 1997). These are the critical criteria for research projects that aim to create social and cultural change for those experiencing various forms of oppression. In such research projects, researchers are supposed to be catalysts for and of change processes by recognising their role as rhetoricians (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2000) and using that role in order to facilitate, promote and support change.

In our different experiences, we found that the emancipatory goals of action research were more elusive than we had expected from our summations of the literature (see Nolas 2009, Nolas 2007, Polistina 2005). The hopes we gathered from foundational the action research texts (e.g. Freire 1993), and our reasons for choosing such an approach in the first place, were far removed from the tensions and challenges

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[2] To achieve rational autonomy and freedom critical social science examines the personal and social, subjective and objective content of the information provided and pursues the recognition and elimination of alienating conditions on communication and social/cultural actions (Carr & Kemmis 1997).

that we experienced in attempting to implement such principles in practice. In this respect, our experience echo poststructuralist analysis which highlights the 'impossible burden' of responsibility that emancipatory, feminist and critical action research places on the researcher (Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan 2003). In this paper we explore the tensions that prevented our research from being the more emancipatory versions we had envisaged. In this respect the article builds on recent discussions on similar personal conflicts with implementation of action research (Bloemhard 2006). We begin with an overview of the two research contexts before moving into an examination of the tensions experienced by the authors in doing action research. We conclude with some thoughts on how such tensions could be addressed.

Moving between worlds - The research contexts

The first research context is from Polistina's grounded theory/action research project on outdoor learning. Researching outdoor learning and outdoor lifestyles with 40 odd non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians required a methodological approach that could easily take a back seat to their everyday worlds. As a researcher this also presented Polistina with the challenge of becoming part of a multitude of individual everyday worlds and became a prerequisite to providing authentic and accurate depictions of these worlds necessitating the choice of a dual methodology. Initial methodological development began with grounded theory and emancipatory action research as the catalyst for meeting this challenge. The author placed herself as a 'researcher as participant' and 'sense maker' (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick 1998) – building interpersonal relationships that would assist with narration of other people's stories through the research. The diversity of relationships arising from these complex social and cultural interactions presented what at times felt like insurmountable tensions. These

tensions were in part managed through the relationships that developed through the research. The researcher found herself involved in the lives of her research participants and, as such felt responsible for their well-being. In each of the relationships her role as researcher, in many instances, took second place to her role as a person in the everyday worlds of the people involved in the research. The multiple roles arising gave way to significant transformational learning moments for Polistina in the discursive process promoted through what Wasserman (2005) identifies as transformative dialogic moments. These are communicative moments that shift the individual cognitive perspective to a relational arena and allow the researcher to gain a deeply embedded understanding of the identities of those involved in their research and others round them. This process however, is arduous and proved in some instances to be stressful, upsetting and frustrating taking its toll on the health and well-being of the researcher herself - an outcome not examined in the initial training to be an action researcher.

Nolas's evaluation of an activity-based, youth inclusion programme in deprived neighbourhoods in England (Humphreys, Nolas & Olmos 2006) provides the second research context. The evaluation used a participatory video methodology (for further details on the methodology see Ramella & Olmos 2005). In doing so the research was embedded in a youth inclusion programme delivered by providing young people with a cultural activity through which they could express and communicate their views and experiences of the programme. The young people used the video cameras to interview their friends and fellow project participants. The researchers then supported the groups with editing their footage into a 15-minute documentary about life in their neighbourhoods and their experiences of the programme. The participatory video project was conceived with two aims. First, the video methodology provided a way

of engaging with young people in order to document their views of the programme and evaluate programme strengths and weaknesses from the young people's point of view. At the same time, the methodology, drawing on participatory action research (PAR) and critical pedagogy, supported the emancipatory aims of raising critical consciousness (Freire 2009). The latter aim was also coherent with the social inclusion programme aims and objectives.

Although the action research contexts had different research aims the researchers' experiences were similar in the sense that both encountered a range of tensions arising from the relationships and interactions they found. One central tension that both researchers experienced was the ethical and personal conflict of being the conduit between the worlds (Lykes & Blanche 2003) of the wider mainstream research community, the research context and the everyday lives of those involved in the action research. The aptitude for living across these worlds was the key feature in successfully (or otherwise) bridging the gaps (Karttunen 1994, p. xii). The following section discusses the main tensions that arose for the researchers in implementing action research in these worlds and through their respective research projects.

Moving between worlds – Exploring the tensions in emancipatory action research

The tensions we experienced emanate from conflicts between our initial expectations of the benefits of undertaking action research and our subsequent lived experiences throughout our research project. The following three overarching tensions form the basis of the main discussion in this paper. The first relates specifically to institutional support and guidance, the second to pluralism in action research and the third to the emancipatory claims of action research.

1) **Support and guidance through our professional development and personal growth:** As an approach to research and development action research involves a good deal of skilful collaboration with diverse groups, much more so than standard methodological approaches. This skill set is often missing in formal training and absent for seminal action research texts. As new action researchers, tensions arose as we explored our assumptions about the ideological purpose of action research and our realisation that this purpose would often not be supported in lived experience as researchers facing situations that required practical and pragmatic responses.

2) **Plurality of methods and worldviews:** Action research is often applied in the service of diverse and varied worldviews (Roberts 1999) and uses a plurality of methods. As such, it is described as a method for providing an on-going and supportive platform for these worldviews during and post-research setting. We often encountered resistance within wider social and institutional groups to such pluralism and the reconstruction of research methodology through the action research process (McTaggart 1991). We therefore found ourselves in a position where the diversity of our information collection styles, that were often chosen by the participants themselves, were not being valued in our everyday institutional worlds as they were in our brief encounters with colleagues met in the action research community.

3) **Dialogue for empowerment:** Whilst action research provides a platform for initiating 'dialogue' with marginalised groups (Freire 1997) dialogue is not always the smooth and seamless process that leads to empowerment. The recognition that empowerment is situated in the everyday social and cultural contexts that perpetuate oppressive social processes, come with a

recognition of the absence of skills and experience to deal with such situations in a constructive manner.

Throughout our discussion we express our growing concern about the difficulty of the lived experience of action research, and the lack of literary or institutional guidance for coping with these tensions (Karttunen 1994, Lather 1991, Roberts 1999). This difficulty is exacerbated when initiating action research for the purpose of social change or emancipatory ends. These concerns highlight areas where, as a community of action researchers, we could seek to expand the support and guidance available beyond the functional advice on how action research ought to be conducted. These include support and guidance for managing emotional, social, cultural and interpersonal conflicts that emerge in the emancipatory action research process.

Tension 1 - Support and guidance through researcher's professional development and personal growth

Although we found a sense of personal and professional purpose in our research contexts, we often found it difficult to maintain this purpose in our academic institutions. Working primarily in what are still 'closed book institutions' (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett 2001), with different levels of support for social change methodologies, the reality slowly emerged of our own "illusions for a better world" (Fals-Borda 1997). Maton (2000) notes that an important means of challenging conventional values and norms is by linking with alternative community settings and groups advocating counter social paradigms to the mainstream culture. This is a very tall order for a newly initiated researcher striving to succeed in this mainstream culture. Very few are able to jeopardise their own personal (and family) security and life stability to become activist social scientists who will sustain different or alternative values, practices and lifestyles to that of the mainstream. While

motivating and inspiring, replication of Fals-Borda's journey out from his institutional ivory tower to that of political activist would prove too difficult to achieve for the majority who advocate social change, including many action researchers. As a minority research discipline in our individual institutions or departments the valuable support found from a limited number of sympathetic and like-minded colleagues was quickly subjugated by those whose interests served the status quo. We found ourselves, as for most researchers working in social change, tied to the very social system that we sought change for our own everyday existence.

Likewise the research aims that were of interest to our academic institutions often clashed with the aims developed in the research context and which were of interest to the communities we worked with. Caught in between two worlds and with little experience or skill as to how to negotiate these tensions, feelings of incompetence set in. As Van Maanen, Manning and Miller identify, fieldwork raises serious and certainly heartfelt questions about one's competence, the worth of one's work, the moral responsibilities associated with the short- and long-term relations one develops with others in the field, the possible consequences - or lack thereof - of one's work, and so on (and on) (cited in Kleinman & Copp 1993).

In the research with English teenagers, Nolas found that creating relationships was not necessarily the same as 'empowerment'. In this instance engaging in banter which might be one way of initiating relationships, posed an ethical dilemma. The banter in question was overtly sexist and racist and clashed with Nolas's own values of gender and racial equality. The result, at least initially, was being stunned into inactivity – the pace of the banter being too quick to respond in a way that problematised the content of the banter. From

the position of a detached observer, a researcher perhaps on young male identity, one could observe that in this instance the participants were drawing on a discourse that was more powerful than the discourse of research. We could also observe that this banter reflected certain tensions and challenges in the young men's own lives and communities. We could argue that power relations are fluid and that 'powerless' or 'powerful' are subject positions which vary depending on the context. These are all very valid points. However, in the moment of being confronted with this banter how does the researcher respond without closing off access to the group and damaging relationships? If Nolas challenged the banter would she still be able to work with the group? What other responses are available to her? How could she respond to this banter in a way that continued the relationships but also challenged what was being said? These are the dilemmas of the action researcher and the skills that in training are not identified or discussed. In this situation the knowledge of what is occurring is "both liberating and paralysing" (Lather 1995). To the newly initiated action researcher this can have devastating effects on their confidence and ability to assert oneself in latter situations in the action research process.

Similar tensions were experienced by Polistina in her the research with indigenous and non-indigenous mothers on outdoor learning and outdoor lifestyles. Riding her bike towards the University like the muscles that carry her, Polistina became weary. Weary in the knowledge that disclosing to colleagues she has been listening to a mother of three children and an Indigenous woman speak of how they share their wealth of pro-environmental knowledge and values with their families and others will receive the usual look of disinterest, superiority, condescension and disbelief in the waste of valuable research time and resources on what they perceive to be a pointless research project. The

knowledge of the women interviewed, their experiences, and the researcher's own experience as a women who also shares pro-environmental behaviours with others, are discredited and devalued. As much as all three women are entangled with the dominant ready made cultural discourse they are, as Lather (1995, p. 51) notes, all too aware of the inadequacy of this available language for "it is what is despised and forgotten that is the bearer of hope, not the socially sanctioned." Such non-formal outdoor learning in community-based and Indigenous cultural contexts is devalued and dismissed as unimportant and inadequate by the dominant social educational system (Clover 1996, Kidd 1997, Rose 1997). This devaluing is a result of non-formal and informal learning having a lack of formally assessed processes, not taking place in a classroom with an 'expert' teacher, is often viewed as a phenomenon which rarely occurs and above all is not controllable by the formal education system.

In these examples we see that the action researcher is accountable to a number of different communities that are often in tension with regards to their aims and objectives. Whilst we can feel a sense of belonging with our communities in our research contexts we often could not feel an equal sense of belonging with the research community in our respective institutions. Being a member of a global action research community provides opportunities for support. But on a daily basis being a lone action researcher or research team can be a lonely experience. Commenting on the varying levels of communication between action researchers, Sankaran (2006) identified that researchers in some countries engage in more frequent conversations than others. A lack of conversations amongst action researchers and in particular newer members of the action research community is a concern for both Sankaran and the authors of

this paper[3]. We believe that this ongoing and supportive conversational element can provide resources (symbolic and material) for action researchers to manage some of the tensions and often highly emotional apprehensions that they encounter in their work.

In short, training and support is required for action researchers (particularly new researchers) in dealing with the dynamics of one-to-one relationships, groups and conflicts. It may well be the case that action researchers working outside of the academy face less institutional isolation (though undoubtedly the tensions here are different). Nevertheless, support and training required for the researcher will invariably be dependent on the contexts in which they work. Ultimately, action researchers need to be given the same support that they work so hard to provide to the groups with whom they work.

Tension 2 - Plurality of methods and worldviews

Communication, collaboration and engagement with social movements at the local and/or individual level, has been put forward as a way of countering postmodernist criticisms of the emancipatory aims of action research (Fisher 2003). Part of this collaboration is the continual reconstruction of research methodologies as part of the action research process (McTaggart 1991) to correspond to the needs and characteristics of the local group. Not recognising the inevitability of this is to engage in cultural imperialism (McTaggart 1991, 1997).

This subsequent cognitive dissonance is highlighted by Bloemhard (2006) who provides a perceptive account of her experience of adapting her research process away from

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[3] This concern has started to be dealt with in the recent survey of members by ALARA executive.

action research to a social constructivist approach. Yet there is a sense of failure in her story which does not reflect the philosophy of action research. "It was with great regret, that I had to abandon the action research focus in favour of a methodology that would allow an exploration of spiritual care …" (p. 8). Her regret was a result of the restrictions of a methodology that was meant to provide flexibility of research design. If we are to support action research explanations then Bloemhard indeed portrayed the essence of the action research process in her ability to allow the research methodology and methods themselves to be reinterpreted and reconstituted in ways that took the inherent characteristics of her participants into account.

Implementation, construction, reconstruction and continuing re-reconstruction of research methodology as an ongoing process may also not reflect the rigidity of many institutional processes. It may also not reflect the cultural imperialism that pervades many research institutions' processes for quality in research established by gatekeepers for the status quo. If available, the action research supervisors are equally constrained in this regard and discussions that challenge these constraints can often highlight the problem without offering alternative ways forward.

Often the result is the action research following institutional or external funding body or stakeholder guidelines (Alasuutari 1995) rather than reconstructive research practices. For Polistina this arose in the use of non-written research information, provided by those in the research, the analysis of data in the form of pictures, theatre, song, wood craft and observed lifestyle practices were often reduced and recorded in written form even though this reporting method was not authentic to the research context. Debates with institutional gatekeepers quickly identified that final report documents were required to be written, other forms of

research evidence are not acceptable outside of disciplines specifically related to that form of discourse for example paintings are acceptable in Creative Arts Research Projects but not outside of the designated academic discipline. Any alternative cultural discourse such as that found in Indigenous Australian research is instantly made inferior to the dominant research paradigm. This tension for authenticity in reporting of research will only be alleviated when all audiences, to whom reports are directed, are able to value a diversity of reporting styles as legitimate forms of ways of knowing and scientific knowledge production.

The cognitive dissonance we experienced in attempting to fit in with the dominant scientific field whilst simultaneously attempting to give voice to other ways of knowing and investigating this knowledge was perturbing. Many of the methods that could be utilised for this purpose are often devalued in traditional Western science. Although specific procedural guidance may exist on implementing flexible methodologies; these guidelines are limited in their ability to prepare action researchers for the difficulties of juggling a diversity of epistemological positions in one research project for example oral, written, visual, sensory and sometimes even spiritual ways of knowing and investigating a research topic. Furthermore the information gathered from one method may be rich when in isolation but problematic when merged with other methods a dichotomy that resembles the rich tapestry that is social and culture life and requiring researcher training that provides tools for dealing with such complexities. For example, the participant's intense sense of spiritual belonging when visiting an ancestral ruin may be difficult to detect by the researcher who is observing the experience and even more difficult, even impossible, for the participant to express in oral terms for the researcher to document in written word. Furthermore, the authenticity of the spiritual experience is likely to be diminished when

removed from the actual place, situation and time it occurred.

Dick (2001) emphasises that it is difficult for researchers not located in the research setting to maintain relationships and achieve participation with the people engaged in the lived experience of that setting. In action research we attempt to situate our witnesses as translators with the action researcher as co-translator or conduit that moves from one world (our research group/community) to another (our dominant social system). Lather argues that this process of co-translation can be,

> [b]oth validating the absolute necessity of speaking and radically invalidating all parameters of reference, the task is doubled: breaking silence and simultaneously shattering any given discourse (1995, p. 49).

Polistina's skill of translating her methodology into everyday language and conversely translating everyday events into research language allowed her to create and sustain her relationships with both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. Similarly, Nolas's skill in negotiating several languages within the lives of the youths provided important insights into the multi-faceted nature of their daily life and coping mechanisms. It is these transliterator skills that are difficult to acquire in academic training and need further attention in the action research training forums.

Our struggle for voice and affirmation of self-identity was exacerbated by our often unsuccessful attempts to implement the notion that action research provides voice to the diverse worldviews of our research participants (Roberts 1999). Providing audibility to the diversity of voices in our research reports is reliant on our ability as researchers to unify research values with the relevant local or social values

of the groups with whom we interact.   Values are expressed in the media, discourse and texts chosen by these groups.

Outside the physical interconnection through, for example, the human senses of sight, sound, touch, smell and speech, media and discourse utilised in human interactions in its widest sense is seen to be a diverse phenomenon, including interconnections between people through sculpture, photographs, motion pictures, maps, graffiti, music and murals (Finnegan 2002). Finnegan proposes that rather than attempt to capture the many ways of interconnecting between humans into a single unilinear list, that we instead draw on the multi-nature of human interconnectedness and work towards becoming sensitised to the different contexts in which they occur. This allows research to be sympathetic to the viewpoint that for a project to be emancipatory it must take into consideration current communication technologies, for example dominant media, and their potency in shaping human experience, and the complexity and multiple-sited constructedness of our individual selves and our worlds (Lather 1991). Fenwick (2000) further suggests that relations of power and knowledge saturate human cognition, so "we must, from a critical cultural perspective, analyse the structures of dominance that express or govern the social relationships and competing forms of communication and cultural practices within that system" (p. 256).

Nolas found herself entering a trading system with both gatekeepers (the youth workers) and participants (the teenagers): the teenagers agreed to work with the evaluation and in return they would receive a DVD output of their work. Meanwhile the youth workers allowed her access to the young people in exchange for the DVD which they could use as an output measure and demonstration of their work when seeking funding. Author, as action researcher, needed to possess, beyond her researching skills, the skills of

negotiating such trade-offs without compromising the ethos of the research. These daily negotiations, manipulations, deals and interactions are often absent for action research reports even though they constitute the plurality of 'methods' used to engage with the field.

The translation of research data value into more local value became the production of the community project DVD output. Nolas's dilemma began with the reporting of this local discourse for the research outputs. These audiovisual stories would still need to be analysed and picked apart in order to become valid and accepted as 'research'. They could not stand alone for what they were: audiovisual stories. They had to be the representation of something else, an underlying reality that the researcher would access through analysis. The inability to utilise the creative forms of research reporting and the need to translate them into the dominant cultural discourse is of course contradictory to the emancipatory aims of the research project. In the end Nolas and colleagues decided on an 'and-and' strategy. We analysed the audiovisual stories *and* we created an audiovisual report (Humphreys, Nolas, and Olmos 2005), that way young people, through their compositions were able to communicate directly with the funders.

Likewise, Polistina was able to effectively argue for the inclusion of Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge in Western outdoor learning and educational contexts (Polistina 2001). As previously stated, she was frustrated by the conflict between the written discourse required for Western scientific research reporting and the lack of ability to utilise reporting evidence more authentic to the Indigenous culture to which the traditional ecological knowledge belonged, for example oral translation, spiritual experiences or art. Lather (1995) described this tension as knowledge that is 'unwritable'. Although giving voice to

diverse worldviews is a goal of action research, some areas of dominant academia are yet to develop a structure that would support researchers who seek to provide evidence through other forms of learning or knowledge (Wane 2002).

The tensions of conducting action research into educational processes with other cultures (Indigenous Australians) arise from the post-modern cultural criticisms that challenge a number of central premises of modernist education. These include the advocacy of science, technology and rationality as the foundation for equating change with progress (O'Sullivan 2001). Tuhiwai-Smith (1997) supports this critique of the mono-intellectual basis of Western science when developing research methodologies specific to Indigenous peoples. Likewise, Gardner's (2006) work on multiple intelligences speaks to the debilitating effect a bias on logical/mathematical intelligence in Western education systems has on other forms of human intelligences[4]. Although guidelines and examples existed for implementation proved problematic.

> During the outdoor lifestyles research an Indigenous man responded to the question '"what does the environment mean to you?"': '"If you want to know how I feel about the land stand by yourself at [name of location] and you will feel it yourself"'. In response to the same question an Aboriginal woman advises me to go and see a specific theatre production as it explains the depth of emotion she is trying to explain. I go to the location by myself and feel the enormity of the environment around me, I go to see the theatre production and find myself crying through most of it. Are these the responses and experiences I am now to attempt to explain in my black and white, clean, non-emotional thesis write-up? There is no ability to transfer this new knowledge I have felt and experienced through the suddenly dwindling power of the pen, nor do I feel compelled to do so. This worldview and traditional ecological knowledge cannot be catered for

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[4] Other intelligences are: linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal/intrapersonal, naturalistic and existential (Gardner 2006).

in the Western scientific model and yet I try again - it is 'required'! (Polistina, PhD research journal).

Grenier (1998) identifies, however, the lack of training available in the use of alternative research approaches. Although writings in some of the critical social sciences disciplines show some relief to this dearth of training and guidance (for example see Knowles & Cole 2002, Tuhiwai-Smith L (Ngati Awa Ngati Porou) 1999)[5].

Some dialogue is also offered to alleviate this tension in cross-cultural action research projects with a focus, justifiably, on discussion and techniques to ensure a lack of exploitation of the non-dominant culture (McTaggart 1999, Polistina 2001), for example in the notion of cultural safety[6] in empowerment research (Pennel, Noponen & Weil 2005). This dialogue, when undertaken can often be research context specific and therefore relevant to a handful of academics interested in this context or fleetingly discussed in non-continual settings (conferences/workshops) that provide a glimmer of hope to researchers struggling for clarity but quickly fade once the event is finished. McMurray (2000) supports this cultural and sub-cultural specificity in action research identifying the difficulty international students found in applying the conceptual two-dimensional action research models that permeate the action research literature.

Important skills and knowledge for action researchers to have are an holistic understanding of the complex interconnections between the personal, social and cultural

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[5] Although it should be noted here that the lack of recognition of the Indigenous origins of these forms of research evidence and information collection from Knowles and Cole (2002) speaks itself to the silencing of other ways of knowing until 'discovered' by Western science.

[6] Cultural safety refers to a context in which one can express and affirm one's own cultural beliefs and practices while extending oneself to understand and respect other worldviews. It is the necessary context for generating Indigenous and local knowledge (Pennel, Noponen & Weil 2005).

worlds of the people and groups they work. This subsequently requires them to have an awareness of multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks for explaining and examining these interconnections in order to bring about social change. This complex skill and knowledge base is not conducive to the reductionist stance of much of the historical Western positivist scientific thought (Barker 2004, Neuman & Kreuger 2003). Knudtson and Suzuki (1992, p. xxii) state that "while [Western] science yields powerful insights into isolated fragments of the world, the sum total of these insights is a disconnected, inadequate description of the whole." Therefore action researchers by definition of their own choice of research style are immediately in tension with the dominant (albeit this dominance is slowly reducing) scientific thought in Western research.

Shilling (1999, p. 544) argues that "a more developed view of the embodied agent and emotional dimension of interaction has the potential to provide a level of analysis which mediates, and allows for the continued saliency of, structure and action." Alternative discourse, for example, habits, senses and sensualities whilst cognitively grounding directed human (inter)action also mould and constrain social structures and action and are simultaneously partially shaped by them. A deeper and more comprehensive focus in researcher training on behaviours, actions and research information collection instruments that assist in achieving this deeper understanding and awareness in our research projects would benefit researchers in Western scientific communities.

Training in alternative research methods and methodologies that are able to give voice to a diversity of worldviews is often reliant on the resolve of the researcher, their

supervisors and immediate research group (for example pockets of critical social researchers such as action researchers in institutions) rather than the academic infrastructure being implemented to establish training in alternative methodologies for all new researchers. Indigenous research strategies and processes, for example, that provide ways of researching and privileging what Indigenous peoples know, believe and value are rarely included in research methodology curriculum (Tuhiwai-Smith L (Ngati Awa Ngati Porou) 1999). Including researcher training in theories such as multiple intelligences (Gardner 2006) and/or cultural awareness training for aspect such as understanding diverse forms of spirituality would also assist their ability to work with alternative research methods and engage with other ways of knowing.

Tension 3 - Dialogue for empowerment

Action research often involves researchers working collaboratively with groups of people in community and/or organisational settings with the aim of improving everyday life and creating better futures. In action research 'relationships' are often seen to play a pivotal role in shaping the engagement with the individuals, groups, communities and organisations taking part in the research. Oliver, Herasymowych and Senko (2003) identify that these relationships can be with our own ideas, assumptions and values, with other people, our job and our organisation or a combination of all of these at once. When improvements happen through action research they are often the result of unearthed local knowledge and ways of doing things discovered through the relationships built during the collaborative process (Bolitho & Hutchison 1998). However, both authors found that relationship building in collaborative forms of research is often left up to personal flair and disposition.

We found that it was often the translation of the everyday 'unsafe' events or local ways of behaving into a research language and discourse that reduced the strength of empowerment for our participants. For us events such as the defamation of a community's cherished alternative outdoor lifestyle, a man's frustration at the lack of change in the wider social system and fear for his children's future, or a young teenage girl once again humiliated in public by a male authority figure - these are the difficult lived experiences. They are valued as life experiences in our marginalised worlds, yet often devalued as irrelevant or unimportant knowledge in our parallel institutional research settings (Polistina 2004, Wagner & Hayes 2005).

Those working on environmental science research may only use the traditional ecological knowledge that is relevant to their specific scientific field rather than the holistic Indigenous approach that diverges from such reductionism. As Walters (1997, p. 29) notes "the language of theory only expresses a reality experienced by the oppressors." In this instance the language of reductionism is the reality of the somewhat oppressive dominant scientific community and the minimal support for holistic Indigenous approaches to scientific enquiry, not unlike action research, in many institutions provides evidence of the implementation of the reality of this oppressive reductionist theoretical language. This oppressive language is often so insidious in our culture that the underlying values of inequality and disrespect are difficult to explain clearly and accurately when confronted with the perpetrator and results subsequently in the inability to adequately implement empowerment and social change for both the research participants and the researcher. Nolas provides a pointed example:

> Two of the guys leave the room and I'm left with Graham* who's fiddling with the tripod, extending and folding the legs. As he does this he repeats 'bitch'. To the tripod, to me, to the air, I don't know. But by this point, I've had enough of the swearing, which together with

the sexist and racist banter, has, by-and-large, been the *lingua franca* since we started.

'Do you know that that's actually really offensive?' I ask Graham who looks at me blankly. The group's youth worker walks into the room and Graham asks him, 'Is it offensive?'

'What?' asks the youth worker.

'Bitch', Graham responds.

'Yeah, it is very offensive', replies the youth worker but Graham sticks to his guns and insists it isn't.

The exchange goes on. The youth worker says the word's offensive because it refers to an animal and not a human. I try to explain that 'bitch' is offensive particular if used to refer to a woman. It's 'derogatory' I tell him, though I'm pretty sure he won't know what this means, so I add, 'when you say something bad about someone, look down on them, it's disrespectful'. He tries to repeat the word and stammers. I enunciate it syllable by syllable. Graham repeats it and gets it right. Then I add, in a deliberately patronising way 'there you've learnt something new today'. But my strategy doesn't make me feel any better and I'm fuming. I feel angry, confused and inadequate.

In the situation above both researcher and the research participant are confronted with alienating behaviours, Nolas experiencing sexist discourse and Graham experiencing the possible embarrassment at being confronted about his behaviour in a social situation and identification of his lack of literacy. Whilst neither person intended to insult or be disrespectful, the momentum in social circumstances and level of personal strength or ability to contend with the dynamics of the situation can combine to produce results were neither person feels that the interaction was beneficial and both feel inadequate and hence further isolated (see also Nolas 2009).

Dominant discourses facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said by whom, where, when and how (Parker 1992). This is particularly relevant when we examine the power of the action researcher, in their legitimised and embodied social role of 'scientist'. For the action research, particularly in its emancipatory form, the researcher must

attempt to utilise the dominant discourse to give voice to marginalised people. Thus empowering and enabling a shift to a more egalitarian approach to research and social processes. Regardless of attempts, however, by the action researcher to suppress or reduce this legitimised power (Adler & Rodman 2006), our privileged position is effectively a symptom of the overall dominant culture's power over other forms of knowing and research and ultimately struggles ensue (Gerrard 1995, Vanderplaat, Samson & Raven 2001).

Such struggles place the newly initiated and possibly the experienced action researcher in a dilemma of personal values conflicting with dominant cultural values and the suppression of alternative thought and value. Examination of the politics that influence hegemonic construction of social knowledge can give a better understanding of the interests at stake and the alternative ways of knowing that may be marginalised (Voelklein & Howarth 2005). This will only be of benefit if action researchers accumulate sufficient political or cultural knowledge and experience to deal with the conflicts that occur on a daily basis in social and cultural change settings.

Cultural awareness and the appointment of cultural supervisors are invaluable when working on research with Australian Indigenous people. However, this cultural education did little to prepare Polistina for the antagonisms, anger, manipulation of power by other white (male and female) researchers and conversely high levels of elation, feelings of intense relief and spiritual experiences she encountered throughout her research.

> The last 36 hours has been intense, related, yet not related to my research. I visited my colleague yesterday for lunch. She introduced me to a friend who was staying, Mary, a female aboriginal elder, who was to attend a meeting with the Queensland Liquor Licensing Board (LLB) the next morning. She was hopeful - ever hopeful - that they

would be able to assist her to designate her local community a 'dry community'[7] and as such they could concentrate on re-establishing their cultural traditions. Her urgency was evident in her passion for discussing the future of the youth in her community. I couldn't help but want to assist in some way. We discussed what she would say and how she did not fear the people she would see but feared what they had the power to do/not do. She had to make them understand how important her culture was and how this culture was a dry culture. We discussed traditional Indigenous family lineage and she shows me in a drawing the complexity of familial and tribal relationships that she must explain to the meeting tomorrow. It is daunting and I wonder if they will understand this complex family and tribal connectivity when viewing it from their nucleur family histories - I doubt it. Suddenly Mary is in despair - she is loosing faith that the meeting will be a success, she becomes upset with the difficulty of explaining her culture and in some way I know it is also because she knows there is a good possibility that they will just not want to know. Suddenly my creative mind kicks in - I'll build a 3 dimensional model of the familial and tribal complexity that shows the layers that Mary is trying to explain. We spend the rest of the afternoon and well into the night cutting, re-cutting, pasting, un-pasting and dashing out to late night stores for more supplies. The end result is a small but effective model - a spinning wheel on top of other wheels all of which provide one aspect of her cultural story and connecting past, present and future. We sit back and view the final model. Mary is close to tears - it is exactly what she needs to give her the confidence to speak to the meeting tomorrow with an authority that she always held but for many social and personal reasons was not confident about. I am close to tears - I still don't fully understand the complexity of Indigenous family and tribal connections but I don't need to - I only need to respect it enough to assist with giving it voice - suddenly my dwindling faith in the ability of my own research to bring about social change is bolstered. Realisation of the complexity of the degrees of connections within my life and research begin to emerge. I realise I haven't finished the chapter for tomorrow's meeting - its 10.30pm – 'I'll do some when I get home'.

I agree to go to the meeting with Mary tomorrow it is at 9.00am. In the meeting Mary uses the model; she discusses with the LLB representatives the need for the dry community status. I watch, I listen and I support her in my silence. The problem is not only the dry community status it is the people in surrounding communities who sell

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[7] A 'dry community' is one that has been declared by the Liquor commission as illegal to sell, house or consume alcohol. It is used extensively by Aboriginal elders and communities to prevent the negative effects of alcohol abuse such as violence, crime and suicide, in their communities. For an example of the continued social conflicts that result from this social process refer to Barker (2005).

liquor illegally to those in dry communities at extortionist prices - those attempting to create better lives for their communities being used by those from the dominant culture who see an opportunity to exploit. The LLB response - This is not the LLB responsibility!!!! - selling outside a dry community (even a couple of feet outside) is not illegal. I feel myself go red as I become furious but I hold my tongue - I watch, I listen.

We leave the meeting and I have to go to work, we don't talk a lot about the meeting just a few comments of support; hope; solidarity - but we both know that there is a good possibility that the LLB will do little to resolve the problems. I drop Mary off and spend the rest of my day at work in a daze – I've just been a voyeur in a process of social change that seems insurmountable. My supervisor is away this week, I go into the staff room and greet others, make tea and listen to them discuss t-tests, regressions, scatter plots and the newly acquired funding for the upgrade of the sports hall - there is no place for me in these discussions - I leave the staff room and go back to the isolation of my office cubical.

I'm angry at the realisation that the LLB will do very little to assist change; I'm upset for Mary and her diminishing yet ever optimistic hope for her community; I'm late with my chapter; I'm annoyed at how little I can do to help her; …. the electricity bill needs paying; Sports hall!!! what a waste of money when so many beneficial social change projects go unfunded and struggle for support; I'm confused - I enjoy drinking wine I don't enjoy the effect it has on some people and alcohol abuse, … enough, enough, enough … I'm exhausted (Polistina, PhD Research Journal).

A process of self-discovery and the development of a critically reflective mind are all encompassing, when paralleled with the action research process regardless of level of emancipatory interests, they become all consuming entities. These entities although liberating and enlightening can also be debilitating and soul destroying if adequate support is not available for the researcher and it is this tension we hope to relieve in some part with our discussions in this paper.

As a result of the tensions discussed above and a myriad of compounding personal and social events, we found as we moved through our research projects that confidence in the ability of action research to provide an emancipatory

platform for dialogue with marginalised groups waned. Whilst the flexibility and responsiveness of action research produced deeper understanding of complex social situations (Roberts 1999) we became less convinced that this understanding would effect social change. Whilst this is a perennial dilemma for all forms of qualitative research, particularly emancipatory and critical theorists' work, it is exacerbated for new action researchers seeking to make effective change in the social settings they research. The skills, knowledge and experience required to successfully create a dialogue for empowerment presents yet another area worthy of more attention in action research training and guidance.

Concluding comments

In this article we have explored three overarching tensions in implementing our respective research projects. These include tensions between the worlds of academe and action research contexts, difficulties with maintaining a sense of self-identity and worth, problems with giving voice to a diversity of worldviews through inappropriate and inadequate research methods and struggling with establishing a dialogue of enabling and empowerment through action research. Reflecting on our early action research experience, we note that much writing on action research does not correspond with our experiences in the field. The idealistic genre which is often employed in writing about action research is not a particularly useful resource for interacting with action research participants. The research 'field' is far more complex, messy and unpredictable. A more nuanced, realistic and sensitive representation of action research in practice is likely to be useful in the long run to reduce the types of tensions in research implementation discussed in this article.

By discussing these research tensions we do not strive to trivialise the situations of the marginalised groups with whom we work, we simply wish to draw attention to some gaps that we have identified in researcher training and guidance. If these training gaps are addressed, this has the potential to provide much needed support for action researchers wishing to bring about social change and become successful conduits, where necessary, to share information and knowledge across many cultural and social worlds.

This training must include competence in maintaining a sense of pride identity and empowerment in one's work when faced with adversity that can be experience in wider social institutions. Best intentions can often be ill-informed, misguided, embroiled in social politics and the support from our colleagues and supervisors may not be enough to address the personal tensions that arise from these situations. We have attempted in this paper to contribute to the literature that provides personal self-reflexive examples of situations and events that researchers may experience at times when conducting action research and other forms of critical and emancipatory research may pitch at us from time to time. We also hope to have assisted in supporting others work through tensions they may be facing with the implementation of their action research projects.

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Implementing pedagogical reform through action learning: emerging issues from the local experience
Lorraine Beveridge

This article describes a Quality Training Action Learning team model that was used to implement Quality Training (QT) in a new school through an AL process as part of the implementation of the Quality Teaching (QT) Framework (NSW Department of Education and Training 2003d). The local experience suggests that AL is most successful when an identified school based problem is addressed and not an imposed one. As most professional learning for teachers occurs outside the school in the form of in-service courses and workshops, scope exists to use AL more widely for the delivery of professional learning in schools.

Introduction

This article outlines the implementation of the Quality Teaching (QT) framework (2003d) through an action learning process during the first two years of a school's operation. The QT framework is a tool for pedagogical reform. I seek to identify some limits and possibilities of implementing professional learning through a Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) team model. I have organised this article around key findings of the project and emergent issues that are potentially applicable to other schools. The major issues addressed are:

- the importance of context on professional learning,
- the academic partner working in schools,

- the value of teacher observation and learning collaboratively,
- bridging the theory- practice divide, and
- teacher feedback on what constitutes effective professional learning.

The QT framework provides a tool for pedagogical reform that teachers can use to improve the quality of the teaching in their classrooms. In this project, a group of interested teachers identified a local need, developed a project and implemented it collaboratively within the school, in an action learning (AL) model. The article seeks to investigate whether QTAL results in serious pedagogical reform that is sustained and whether this positively impacts on teacher learning.

Background

In 2007 I was appointed to a newly established school in a large regional centre in New South Wales, Australia, as an assistant principal. The staff were responsible for setting up everything from scratch – a mammoth task. School targets reflected system targets in the first year, and one of the system targets related to the implementation of the QT framework. The QT framework is designed to enhance teaching quality in order to ensure all students receive high quality teaching in NSW public schools. It has been clearly established that the quality of teaching is "the most decisive factor in what students achieve in school" (Gore and Ladwig 2003).

What is the Quality Teaching (QT) framework?

The QT framework is a pedagogical model that incorporates the elements of classroom practice and assessment for which there is a demonstrated positive effect on student outcomes.

In the model, three dimensions of pedagogy are linked to improved student outcomes:

1. Intellectual quality
2. Quality learning environment
3. Significance

Each of the above three dimensions is described in terms of six elements:

	Intellectual quality	Quality learning environment	Significance
Elements	Deep knowledge	Explicit quality criteria	Background knowledge
	Deep understanding	Engagement	Cultural knowledge
	Problematic knowledge	High expectations	Knowledge integration
	Higher order thinking	Social support	Inclusivity
	Metalanguage	Students' self regulation	Connectedness
	Substantive communication	Student direction	Narrative

New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2003d).

The QT framework provides a means by which teachers can reflect on their practice and make judgements about the quality of their pedagogy. In this way they are using data collected from their own classrooms when making judgements about how to improve their practice and improve student learning outcomes. The framework also

provides teachers with a common language to reflect on their practice with their peers. It is a framework that schools can use to build their own local initiatives, in doing so enabling teachers in schools to "set their own professional learning agendas"(Gore and Ladwig 2003).

History of the Quality Teaching framework

The QT framework has strong connections with authentic pedagogy (Newmann 1996). The authentic pedagogy model was based on a comprehensive educational research base over thirty years of what constitutes effective teaching and assessment. Authentic pedagogy focuses on raising the intellectual quality of work for all students. Newmann (1996) identified three criteria for authentic intellectual work:

1. *Construction of knowledge*: using knowledge to analyse, interpret, synthesise and evaluate, rather than only reproduce knowledge.

2. *Disciplined inquiry*: gaining in- depth understanding of topics and using elaborated forms of communication to express one's conclusions.

3. *Value beyond school*: learning is authentic or real world and has significance beyond the classroom.

In 1998, the Queensland Government commissioned a study in its 'leading' schools, called the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Lingard, et al 2001). At the end of the first year of the study, the team developed a four-dimensional model of pedagogy they called productive pedagogy. Productive pedagogy emerged out of the QSRLS research. The team developed an instrument for looking at pedagogy based on the authentic pedagogy instrument. The New Basics initiative came about as a result of the QSRLS study, and focused on a new curriculum structure (Queensland Government Department of Education and

Training 2004). Underpinning this research was Bernstein's three message systems of schooling (Young 1971):

1. Curriculum – what counts as valid knowledge
2. Pedagogy – what counts as the valid transmission of knowledge
3. Evaluation – what counts as valid realisation of this knowledge

Relating Bernstein's research to the Queensland experience, New Basics was the curriculum initiative developed to change what was happening in Queensland schools, rich tasks were developed as a new assessment framework and Productive Pedagogy was the model used to support curriculum reform. This model was further refined based on the data gathered in the QSRLS study to develop the model known as Quality Teaching in NSW schools.

In 2003, the NSW Department of School Education began publishing a series of documents (New South Wales Department of School Education 2003) and DVDs for schools, to support professional learning. The documents outlined the QT framework, the three pedagogical dimensions and eighteen elements of the model for teachers. The resources were designed to "support the work of school leaders and teachers in addressing teaching and learning as a long term strategic priority" (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003a). The materials were developed "to deepen teachers' understanding of the NSW model of pedagogy and provide a focus for teachers to work together as a school staff, team or as individuals" (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003a). Since its adoption in 2003, QT has continued to be a strategic priority in NSW government schools, and three phases of resources, including discussion papers, books and DVDs have been produced to support its ongoing implementation.

An additional set of resources was released in 2008, linking the QT Framework to professional teaching standards of the NSW Institute of Teachers.

The importance of context on professional learning

The school was situated in a high growth housing estate in a large regional centre. The student population doubled in size in the first two years of its operation. This rapid increase of students and staff had implications for the school training and development plan because a large portion of staff were not involved in the initial staff surveys and training relating to QT.

Implementation of the QT framework

A survey (Table 1) was implemented mid 2006 to determine the knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff in relation to the QT framework (NSW Department of School Education 2003). QT did not have a high priority in the school training development plan in the first year due to competing pressures and time constraints. The initial data collection identified that most staff felt they had a sound understanding of the framework. Initial staff perceptions of their understanding and use of the QT Framework are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Initial staff survey results - Quality Teaching Framework

Survey focus areas	Number of teachers	Mean	Standard Deviation
Understanding of Quality Teaching Framework 1=poor, 2=reasonable, 3=good, 4=very good	12	2.92	1.1
Understanding Quality Teaching dimensions 1=poor, 2=reasonable, 3=good, 4=very good	12	2.75	.75

Can identify Quality Teaching elements 1=poor, 2=reasonable, 3=good, 4=very good	12	2.92	.9
Used the framework when planning lessons 1=never, 2= rarely, 3=sometimes, 4=often	12	2.67	.65

Table 1 above shows most staff members indicated they had a sound understanding of the QT framework (M=2.67- 2.92), with the exception of one staff member who had taught in a small school in western NSW prior to her appointment, and had not seen or used the QT framework previously. In order to check the validity of the self- reported survey results, a school development day activity in which teachers were asked to place the elements under the correct dimensions of the model on a chart, revealed staff knowledge and understanding in relation to QT was not in fact deep, and needed to be addressed explicitly, to ensure there existed a shared understanding of what the elements looked like in classrooms.

Action learning (AL)

Action learning was the implementation mode for the project. The term 'action learning' is commonly accepted to mean learning from action or experience, and taking action as a result of that learning (Zuber-Skerritt 2001). AL is related to action research. Both AR and AL are cyclical processes which includes reflection in and on action (Schön 1987). Both processes include a "self reflective spiral" of planning, acting, observing then replanning, acting, observing (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). Some literature suggests AL is a watered down version of AR, and lacks rigour (Groundwater-Smith and Irwin 2009, Kemmis 2008). The process of AL is often used by organisations to deliver an innovation to its members, as was the case in this project. Schools applied for funding to implement AL projects that

used the QT Framework, a systems priority, to address a locally identified school need.

Action learning is often resource-heavy. The school applied for and was successful in obtaining an Australian Government Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP) Quality Teaching Action Learning (QTAL) grant in late 2007 that provided funds for professional learning for teachers in an AL model for a two-year period. The grant was specifically for teacher release; time for teachers to learn and plan together, and reflect on their pedagogy. I initiated the grant because I had led AL projects in previous schools and have found AL to be a powerful form of teacher professional learning, a view that is supported in the literature (Aubusson, et al 2009, Groundwater-Smith & Mockler 2009, Ingvarson, et al 2005).

The project was called the "Thinking School Project". The main aim was to develop a school culture that values intellectual quality in teaching and learning. This dimension was targeted as an initial focus because the intellectual quality dimension of the QT framework is "central to pedagogy that produces high quality student learning outcomes" (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003d).

Getting started with the project

The first part of the project involved unpacking each of the elements of the Framework, and forming a shared understanding of what each element looks like in the classroom. The team used research from the Annotated Bibliography (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b) to deepen their understanding of the research base underpinning the QT Framework. This was not a popular part of the project with all team members, because some of the team did not see the relevance of

educational research. Teachers worked in buddy teaching pairs to plan and implement lessons that focused on a number of elements from the QT Framework. Team members chose a buddy within the QTAL team from the same stage in which they were teaching. Buddy teaching lessons were coded using the QT Classroom Practice Guide (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003c). Some lessons were videotaped and these lesson extracts were used as a basis for reflection and planning for further action during QTAL team meetings.

A cyclical model of the Thinking School Action Learning Project can be seen in Figure 1 below:

Action: Focus on QT- IQ dimension

Plan
- Plan for thinking classroom
- Jointly plan literacy unit with buddy teacher
- QTAL team learn together about The Thinking School, Habits of Mind, Authentic Pedagogy

Evaluate
- Evaluate pre, post data each term
- Include school community in action research
- Link QTAL team activities to professional learning of staff

The Thinking School Project Term Plan: <name> primary school will value intellectual quality in teaching and learning

Analyse Data

Implement
- Buddy teachers to observe each other's lessons and provide supportive feedback on elements of the framework visible in classrooms
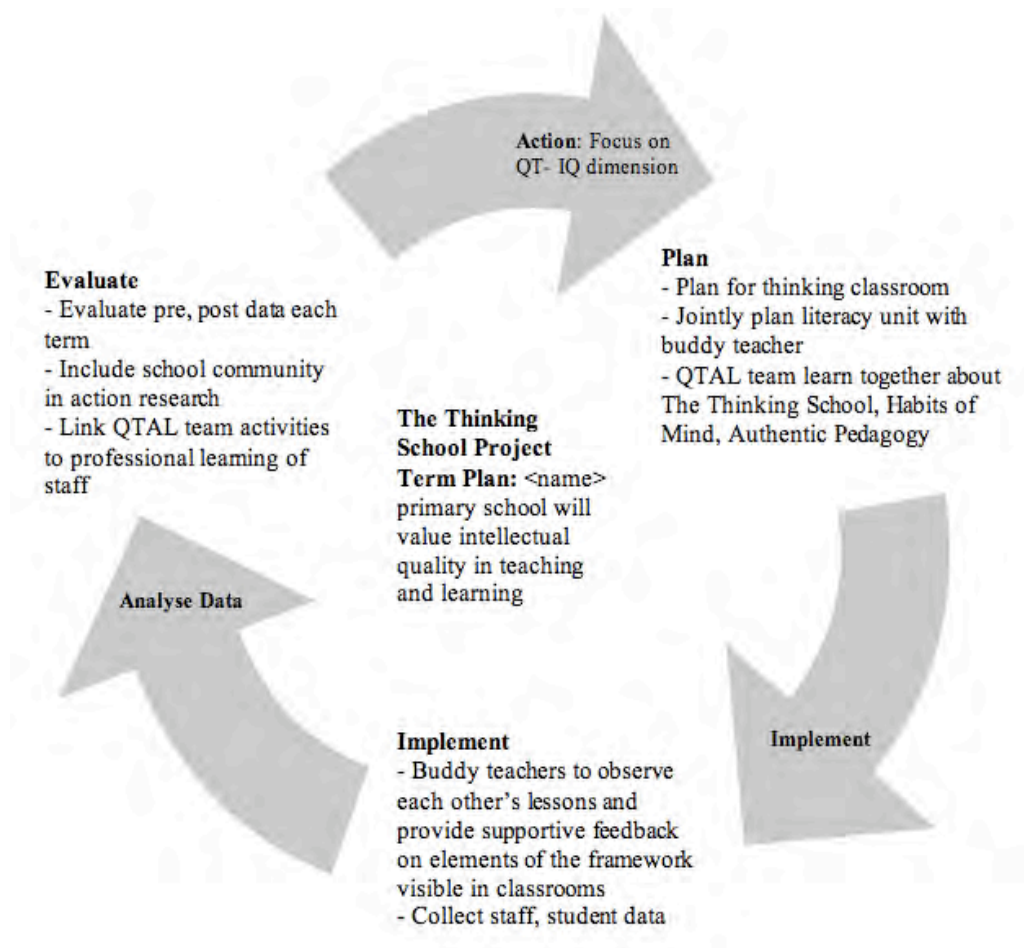- Collect staff, student data

Implement

Figure 1: Action learning plan 'The Thinking School Project.'

The six QTAL team members were interviewed to determine a relevant starting point for the project, to ensure the project was aligned with individual professional learning needs and to identify the capacity of the QTAL team. Initially, individual participant interviews were planned however the team decided they would prefer a group interview as it was generally felt to be less threatening. There were a number of young, inexperienced teachers in the group who were not keen to be interviewed individually. In the group interview, recorded by the school principal on video, team members discussed why they volunteered for the project, and their professional learning goals. Reasons given by the team as to why they volunteered for the project were to:

- learn about the QT framework and how it can improve pedagogy,
- learn from other team members, and
- become involved in a team based school improvement project.

This collaborative culture continued throughout the project. A video diary was kept throughout the year for most project activities and was used for evaluation and reflection.

> I want to improve my own professional teaching model including my content and methods. I want to become more competent and confident in my teaching. I want to learn from others. I feel this project will help me to do this. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, February 2008).

The academic partner

Funding for the project included the allocation of an academic partner from a university to assist the school team to be reflective and achieve its identified goals. The school QTAL team lodged a specific request in terms of the background and experience they required of their academic partner. A person was allocated to the project by the funding

body that did not meet the specific criteria requested by the QTAL team. When it was evident early on that the match was not working as planned, the team queried the funding body about the choice of academic partner and requested someone more suitable. The funding body denied this request, and the QTAL team were informed they had to accept the academic partner they were allocated for the project. The team felt the funding body did not listen to their views, and they saw this as a negative aspect of the project. Initially, the academic partner expressed concerns about the expectations of the QTAL team and her ability to meet these expectations. Her concerns mirrored the concerns of the team when she was allocated to the school by the funding body. There were initial difficulties with availability in relation to establishing mutually suitable times to meet, and concerns about the academic partner not having primary teaching experience. These issues were mostly solved as the project progressed, due mainly to the flexibility of the academic partner and QTAL team, and their determination to make the project work. The academic partner's excellent communication skills were identified as a strength by team members in the evaluation report:

> Our academic partner always made us feel as though we were doing a great job. She boosted our confidence at every opportunity, and made us feel like we were making excellent progress with our project. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, December 2008).

There are many potential difficulties in the partnering of academics with school teams. Only one of our team had worked with an academic partner previously and the team's expectations may not have been realistic. In our school, we had requested a number of criteria in our academic partner and these criteria were not fully met in the match that was made by the funding body. We requested a person who had worked in primary schools and had experience in implementing the QT Framework. The major difficulty we experienced was a lack of flexibility- from the school and

university perspective. We had originally planned our project around our academic partner's availability, then her university timetable changed and we were no longer flexible at the school level due to competing timetabling constraints.

Ewing (2004) identified a number of difficulties experienced by academics partnering with schools in QTAL projects across NSW including a confusion of roles, ineffective communication and unrealistic expectations of schools. The QTAL team was aware of this research and as a result the QTAL team and academic partner worked from the onset to determine clearly defined roles for team members and the academic partner. The academic partner was a critical friend to the team, contributing when she felt she had something worthwhile to say and always ready to give feedback in relation to team activities when called upon.

As the academic partner was a highly credible specialist secondary teacher, she led staff meetings and volunteered to assist the school in her subject area. In this way a meaningful, ongoing school/university partnership has been fostered, although not directly related to the QTAL project. In the 2008 end of year report the team completed for the funding body, a mixed response to the role of academic partner was provided by individual team members. The original concerns were still evident but overall it was agreed the academic partner was a positive contributing influence to the project because she provided a 'big picture' perspective, which aided teacher reflection, and encouraged sustained conversations about the project from an outsider's view. Despite our earlier concerns (which were largely shown to be groundless) the team agreed the critical, supportive reflection of the academic partner enriched the professional learning of the team.

Fine tuning the project plan

The funding agency held a state conference for new QTAL teams in March 2008. By this time regular local QTAL team meetings had begun. These meetings were characterised by "distributed" (Spillane, et al 2001) or shared leadership, involving team sharing and exploring a broad research base.

Bridging the theory-practice divide

The two team members who attended the planning conference made a number of significant changes to the project. Firstly, they decided not to continue with the QT literature review segments of meetings. They also decided not to share QTAL team activities with the whole staff on a regular basis as had become the practice up to that point. The team members who dismissed the research focus of the project did not see the value of academic research; a common perception among teachers who feel research lacks practicality and transferability to the classroom.

The research base outlined in the Annotated Bibliography (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b) is an important and rigorous underpinning of the QT Framework. By studying this research base, teachers are reminded how the framework originated, and how it can be used to improve pedagogy. Teachers often do not value research, and academics do not always value what teachers as practitioners bring to research. Kemmis (1980) began a keynote address at the Australian Association of Research in Education (AARE) with the powerful words:

> Why is it that the great army of teachers of Australian school children do not come to our conferences? Is it because we have concerns more profound or more esoteric than Australian teachers, or because (by and large) our concerns are not their concerns?

His claim that teachers and academics do not always talk the same language is well supported in the literature (Gore and Gitlin 2004, Lewin 1947, Ruddock & Hopkins 1985).

Gore and Gitlin (2004) made some practical suggestions on how both teachers and academics can more effectively come together and bridge the theory practice divide. They suggested providing summaries for teachers so they get the facts without having to wade through the academic jargon in research articles. In hindsight, this strategy may have been useful for the QTAL team in this project, so the teachers who do not value academic research have access to findings of research in a user friendly, practical form. Before the team dropped the research component of the project, team members took turns leading the discussion on an academic paper from the QT Annotated Bibliography (New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2003b) each meeting. The first few research articles were generally well received by the team. Discussion on the final research article studied by the team before the practice was scrapped, was led by a team member who introduced the article in the meeting with the following comments:

> I didn't really understand this article and I don't see how it can help me improve my teaching. I didn't really see the relevance of it to our project. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, March 2008).

The issue of the leader or driver of QTAL teams ensuring that relevant research is used to enrich teacher learning in AL is one that deserves serious consideration, to ensure teachers have a deep knowledge and understanding of the topics they are investigating. However, the practice of leaders in QTAL teams directing what the team uses to build knowledge conflicts with the basic premise of AL of all team members being equal. I found myself in a personal dilemma when the team chose to stop the research review segment of team meetings, as I believe it was ultimately not the best

course of action for the team. I chose not to express my opinion at the time because I had worked hard to build shared leadership and empower the team, and felt my criticism of a decision made by the rest of the team would undermine team members' professional confidence. I came to ultimately regret my decision not to express my opinion that research encourages practitioners to query what they do and change their practice based on empirical evidence of what works best, a view supported in the literature (Ronnerman, et al 2008, Ruddock & Hopkins 1985, Stenhouse 1981).

The value of teacher observation and learning collaboratively

After having spent most of the first term of the project gaining a shared understanding of the elements of the QT framework through collaboration and sustained conversation, the team decided to move to the next phase of the project. This focused on 'buddy teachers' observing each other's lessons, and reflecting on their classroom practice. Buddy pairs of teachers from the QTAL group provided supportive feedback on elements of the framework that were visible in the classroom. The resource used by the QTAL group to provide collegial feedback to teaching buddies was the coding sheet in the QT Classroom Practice Guide (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003c). The observing teacher used the guide to reflect on the degree to which their teaching buddy addressed the elements of the QT framework in the lessons they observed. Buddy teaching cycles focused on three to five previously agreed QT elements and these elements were the focus of feedback and discussion at the next QTAL meeting. Meetings were held within a week following buddy teaching sessions, to ensure teacher reflections were valid and reliable in relation to what was actually observed in classrooms. Some buddy pairs chose to video their lessons and share these video clips at meetings. These sustained conversations often revealed

aspects of the pedagogy the class teacher had been not been previously aware of, yet was evident to the wider QTAL group during reflection:

> I knew this child did not readily engage with the learning in class, however I did not realise the extent to which he was totally disruptive to the students around him until I saw it for myself on video, and it was pointed out to me by the team during a QTAL reflection circle. *QTAL team member* (personal communication June 2008).

The team member who noted a student displayed severe behavioural issues initiated a full academic and behavioural assessment of the student following the reflection circle. The student was then placed in a regional support class to assist him with his learning.

There are many instances of such peer collaboration by teachers and the powerful learning that can result from them. Groundwater Smith and Mockler (2009) describe the richness of focus group discussions in the 'Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools', a largely self funded network of thirteen schools, education officers and academic partners in the Sydney region who focus on learning with and from each other, as well as contributing to wider community learning networks. Ronnerman (2008) describes the professional learning and support that is embedded in Swedish education culture, demonstrated through "research or study circles." These are meetings where participants develop their professional knowledge through interaction and collaboration. Teacher collaboration and collegial support are essential elements of the AL mode of inquiry. They are powerful, well supported professional learning tools.

Teachers reflected on the feedback they received from their peers, and changed their practice as a result. The coding of lessons by buddies meant that their awareness of whether

and how they were applying the QT Framework in their pedagogy was heightened.

> I found the buddy teaching sessions the most useful part of the QTAL project. Teachers do not usually get the opportunity to observe their peers. I learned a lot from observing my buddy teaching and focusing on using specific elements of the QT framework. It gave me lots of ideas for my own teaching. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, November 2008).

Of the six QTAL team teachers in this project, five teachers agreed that peer observation is a valuable and under-utilised form of professional learning for teachers.

Teacher feedback on what constitutes effective professional learning

Funding for the project was for two years (2008, 2009). At the end of the first year, the team held a celebration of learning to reflect on their achievements throughout the year, in terms of making the QT Framework visible in the school and the team's progress in creating a 'Thinking School'. The team overwhelmingly identified the main strength of the project in 2008 was the gift of time – time for teachers to plan and collegially reflect on their practice. By focusing on a small number of QT elements each buddy teaching session, team members expressed they were breaking their learning into manageable chunks, and as a result were able to incorporate new learning into their everyday practice. They identified that as a result of their involvement in QTAL, the team members all possessed a deeper understanding of the dimensions of the QT framework, the individual elements and what they looked like in classrooms. In the words of a team member, "We now all speak the same language about QT". One team member provided the following feedback at the evaluation meeting at the end of 2008:

> I now think about the framework and focus on individual elements when planning lessons and units, to improve the quality of my teaching. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, November 2008).

Team members identified a number of strengths of 'The Thinking School Project' during the evaluation meeting in November 2008. All team members highly valued the focus on improving their practice in their own classrooms through lesson observations and feedback. All teachers stated their knowledge and understanding of the QT framework had increased substantially, and they were now using it as planning tool when programming and delivering lessons. The metalanguage related to QT made more sense to them as a result of the team's sustained conversations about what the eighteen elements and three dimensions of the model actually looked like in classrooms. Teachers reported the QT framework provided a shared language to talk about their practice. One team member acknowledged the essential role the team coordinator had in ensuring the team were prepared for meetings, leadership was shared and school resources were coordinated to ensure the project progressed throughout the year:

> Meetings were highly focused and useful because our coordinator ensured we were ready and prepared. Collegiality was an important part of QTAL in 2008. I felt valued and important because I had time to focus on my core business- teaching, with the team. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, November 2008).

Despite the overall positive evaluation of QTAL in November 2008, the team decided they did not wish to continue with the project in 2009 in its existing format. The main reason stated was that being regularly released from class to engage in professional learning was disruptive for their classes.

> I have a challenging class, and having a casual on my class while I'm at meetings has proven increasingly disruptive throughout the year. Although I have learned a lot this year from the team meetings, I would prefer to be teaching. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, November 2008).

This feedback suggests possible alternative delivery modes for professional learning in schools. One strength of QTAL is that teams have the flexibility to decide how and when their projects will be implemented. At the onset, the team decided to have meetings in school time, as some teachers had young children, which made after school meetings difficult. In addition, there were already meetings most afternoons that teachers were expected to attend. For an AL mode of inquiry to be adopted and sustained, school structures must be in place to support groups of teachers meeting with the aim of improving their practice. There needs to be a school culture supportive of teacher research. Hoban, Ewing, Kervin, Anderson and Smith (2005, p. 118), in an evaluation of school based AL, called these structures "enabling conditions" and identified a number of workplace conditions that support and sustain school based AL:

- Leadership
- Antecedents (previous involvement in successful change projects)
- School culture
- Funding
- Time

The small group learning needs to be valued highly enough by the school that "enabling conditions" are put in place to ensure that the QTAL team is allocated the resources it requires in order to succeed. As each school context is unique, this needs to occur at the local level of the school, with support when needed. In this project ongoing support was provided from state coordinators of the funding body.

Two team members felt that their being regularly released from class might be potentially divisive.

> I'm a relatively new teacher and I think other staff members may resent the fact that we are released from class for QTAL and they are

not. Although we have shared what we've learned and resources we've produced during staff development days and staff meetings, I would prefer everybody benefited more as we all need to learn more about QT and raising the intellectual quality of lessons. I don't want to be treated as special. *QTAL team member* (personal communication, November 2008).

The team therefore asked for the project to be expanded to be more inclusive of other staff members in 2009, and for more opportunities to share their professional learning with colleagues across the school. The dichotomy between whole staff and small group professional learning was identified as an issue. Some felt that by working in a team or small isolated group, the learning was not necessarily disseminated across the school. Feedback from the QTAL team in the evaluation in November 2008 was that small group learning is good, but at some stage the rest of the staff have to come on board for whole school pedagogical reform to be adopted.

Changing directions in 2009

The funding body held a series of ICT workshops for QTAL team representatives across the state from November 2008 to March 2009. At the workshops teachers were informed that the focus for the expenditure of funds in 2009 was technology, in line with the Federal Government's Digital Education Revolution (Rudd, et al 2007). This changed the focus from the previous year.

In 2009, at the school level, the QTAL team was expanded to include the whole teaching staff as suggested by the 2008 team. Teachers were organised into three action learning teams. Some of the 2009 QTAL activities addressed local school technology needs, and others were recommendations by the funding body.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined a local case in which a QTAL team model was used to implement QT in a new school through an AL process. The local experience suggests that AL is most successful when an identified school based problem is addressed and not an imposed one. Teachers in the QTAL team reported that an identified strength of the professional learning project was the AL model - teachers learning with and from each other. As most professional learning for teachers occurs outside the school in the form of in service courses and workshops, scope exists to use AL more widely for the delivery of professional learning in schools. In doing so, this should empower teachers to look to their own practice for evidence-based ways to improve it. The main learning from the QTAL project is that AL should be used more widely for the delivery of professional learning in schools in order to empower teachers to learn from their own practice in collaboration with other teachers.

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About the author

Lorri teaches in a primary school in a large regional centre in NSW. Her interest is in teacher professional learning. She began her PhD in July 2007, researching action learning and action research as professional learning tools in schools. She hopes to gain a 'weltenschauung' or worldview of the topic that will improve AL and AR implementation in Australian schools. She published her first article, "Action learning and Indigenous Literature," in *Intercultural Education* 20(2) in April 2009. This is her second article. Lorri is a new member to ALARA and attended the ALARA national conference in Melbourne in September 2009.

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Is "transformation" real? Reflections on an ALARA Conference catalyst workshop

Susan Goff

The question

I do it myself, when in conversation with clients, peers in workshops, over dinner with guests – I find myself stating something like: but if the change is transformational (and I tend to emphasise the word with passion) …then we are moving in the right direction. In my mind's eye a vision of a better future lights up as I get to the second "a" and I am almost in a brand new world without lifting a finger.

Is this you too?

The word "transformation" is increasingly weighted with imbued values of might, goodness and even redemption. We talk about transforming society, our ways of living, and our organisations. Here is the sort of thing that I am referring to:

> We facilitate projects that encourage transformational learning in partnership with individuals, organisations and communities

and

> A focus on systemic transformation, however, sets a higher standard for the ambitions of design practice, insisting that the power of design is its ability to transform the physical, social, economic systems that constitute our relationship to the world around us.

When I see the term used this way I wonder what the implied value attribution is about. The word "transformation" plays into our imaginations and usefully so. I wanted to explore what takes place in that imagining in other peoples' minds, and how we can deploy the wisdoms we might find there in work that we claim to be "transformational"?

At the ALARA Australian Conference in Melbourne, 2009, I invited participants to join me in a two-part workshop about whether transformation is "real". The question is slightly tricky, as the question of "real" brings with it philosophical challenges, and also technical ones concerning the disciplines of knowledge construction that science demands. When considering the form of something, and that form being in flux, aesthetics are also involved – as our power of seeing that which is appearing will actively contribute to the emerging and observable form.

At the conference, we were not in a situation where we could embark on a rigorous investigation, however we could do *some* work on the question. That is, we could do work that would be difficult to do anywhere else, with the great benefit of the collaborating contributions of fellow action researchers.

I am very grateful to Ross Colliver, Kay Distel, Margaret O'Connell, Josè Guavarra, Peter Lightbody and Desley Lodwick for joining into the inquiry and supporting the release of this account.

How we engaged in the question

I had a rough idea about how I wanted to go about this mini-inquiry, but left the process of creating the actual approach to a conversation with whoever turned up. At our

conferences, whomever turns up could be any amount of people from no one to a packed room.

Five participants decided to take part in the first 90-minute session. There was a scheduled break after this session, and another group of participants joined for a second 90-minute session. Again, it was unknown if any would come to this second session, or if the same people would return. These unknown elements created interesting praxis challenges for me.

Part 1

We agreed to carry out a Fran Peavey questioning exercise in the first session around the question "how do we know if transformation is real?"

When explaining the exercise to participants in workshops, as I did in this workshop, I use the following diagram:
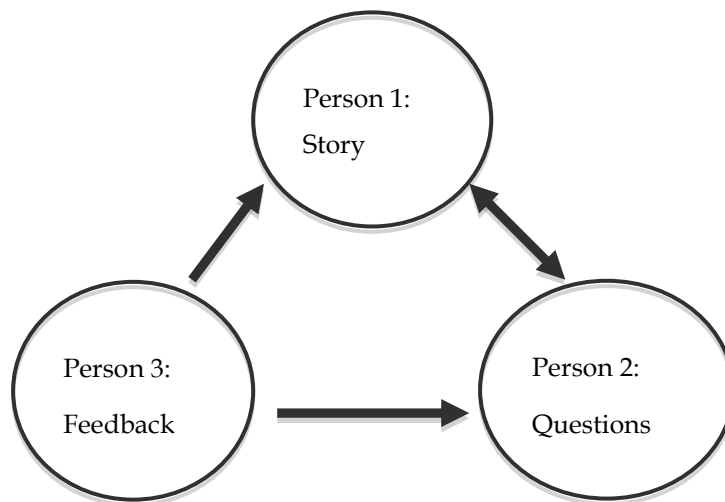
Three people sit in a triangle, each with a different role. The roles are:

a) Storyteller: Telling a story about (in this case) a transformative experience for five minutes,

b) Questioner: Questioning the Storyteller for five minutes about that experience, and

c) Observer: Giving appreciative feedback to both the Storyteller and the Questioner about the quality of communication and ideas, also for five minutes.

Once a 15-minute round is completed, the roles rotate so each person adopts all three roles across three 15-minute rounds. The whole session is about 60 minutes long to allow for debriefing between rounds. I have found this exercise to be excellent for generating reflective data.

The facilitator's role is to keep each of the participants' roles in tact and to support the rotation in a timely way.

As we had two other people in the first session we had an extra observer and a facilitator. The extra observer offered a birds-eye view of the whole interaction including themselves and the facilitator from a variety of different stances (like a ball being exchanged between people, or from a helicopter view). As facilitator, I sat to one side, keeping time and providing very low-level guidance.

From this first session we collectively drew out key learnings about how we know transformation is real, and listed them.

Here is how they were documented with some explanatory additional notes to ease comprehension, identified with square brackets in the interests of transparency with data management:

- Connecting inner self and context – a "felt" sense – compelling, attending to senses/human biology – [important to be] healthy [so you can sense it]
- The principle of getting back and into the inner self [like a palpable] switch to consciousness and less stress
- To have another person know of your transformation, to feel the reality of transformation being witnessed, staying present to it – [the legitimacy of] the peripheral observer
- Putting words around transformation – [putting the event into] the public domain
- [Experience a] difference in the sense of who I am in so many ways
- [Heeding and responding to] "a Call" – the world is moved deeply and cannot be denied
- There is a choice – and only one way to go – and I don't know what it is
- Orientation – presence of place [is important as other things are changing shape]
- Energies of gender, generation, standpoint and pre-configuration [are evident]
- Gestation is occurring – time, body, mind, spirit, and physical change
- Re-settling [as a result of the transformation]
- Leaving what has been – the hand in the rock story [of a mountaineer who had to amputate his hand to survive a climb – transformation is also felt as real through] brutality, ruthlessness, grieving and the drive of survival
- [We are engaged in] Reach and Hold [as we participate in transformation].

I made notes and went to lunch.

Part 2

After the break and to my delight, four of the five participants returned and two new people joined us. We briefly described what we had done in the first session to the new comers.

We then agreed to explore one of the learning outcomes in much greater depth to see how it stood up. I suggested we use a quasi "Constellations" activity because I wanted to practice it, and also because this method provides a very dynamic environment within which to explore issues in depth.

I beg forgiveness from trained Constellators for my hybridising the praxis and accept all criticism. For those who are unfamiliar with "Constellations" as a breakthrough methodology, I describe it as a kinetic, relational praxis, which intends to heal systemic problems. It uses drama, intuition and relational patterns with which to reveal new ways of knowing and being with each other in the depths of difficult issues. It felt appropriate for an exploration of our subject given the dynamic nature of transformation. For more detailed information about this practice, please see my additional notes at the conclusion of this article.

Back to our workshop!

Our participant stated that she was having real problems at work with a colleague who was blocking her project delivery. It was a major, three-year, whole system change project that she had been working on for one year. I invited her to select just one of the key learnings from the earlier session to explore in the context of her workplace issue, using Constellation-type approaches. The learning that she chose for us to explore was that she knows transformation is real when…

- Energies of gender, generation, standpoint and pre-configuration are evident

We then formed a circle creating a central arena area, and she then asked two people to enter into the arena, as Constellations requires. She nominated one person to represent the person with whom she was having the problem, and the other represented a known good friend whom she trusted to represent her in working with the problem in this exercise. I facilitated the statement-making between the players that the practice requires, and the other members of the circle made comment at particular turning points. The person whose problem was being explored joined the circle, quietly observed, and commented on the progress of the interaction.

Everyone quickly learned the rather forced process that Constellations requires, and accommodated the significant shift in communication that takes place. At times the person with the issue felt restrained by this, and wanted to jump into the interaction with reflections, which came to mind as a result of observing the enactment. I had to gently request that she restrain herself, which she obliged. While it was felt that I managed the process sensitively, I am never comfortable with that sense of "control of the other" that method imposes on people in order to sustain praxis and let the theory do its work.

It is a dilemma about power and discipline, rigour and relational practices in human inquiry that remains unresolved for me.

At the conclusion of the exercise, we reflected again on the insights about transformation that this second level of exploration revealed.

Insights

First, our participant with the issue was amazed at how exactly the Constellation exercise reflected the situation she was dealing with. The exercise also allowed the claim to be made that the energies of gender, generation, standpoint and pre-configuration were evident in the situation and that she was indeed involved in a transformation. It let us see how this claim that transformation is real in reference to this learning outcome can look in real life (to the extent that the enactment allowed).

There seemed to be two dimensions of transformation revealed as "real".

One was the more familiar idea of transformation: a large scale, strategic project driving systemic change across virtual communication systems in an educational institution. However it was coming up against blocking systems, which were related to gender, inter-generational ways of knowing and doing, clashing concepts of responsibility (standpoints) and confusions about what the project was actually doing as compared to what it was intended to do.

In this gap between intention and actualisation, a second level of transformation revealed itself. This was about compassion, respect, timing and assertion of legitimacies that could comfortably align as compared to those that clashed and created inter-personal conflicts. The participants felt a shift take place (a transformation) to the way the problems were seen, how they felt about them and the people concerned, as well as how they might be changed in the real world.

Post workshop reflections

I have no wish to analyse the outcomes here – as they belong to everyone who participated in the activity. My particular quest though, was to see if there was a way of claiming that transformation is real, and if so how to do this.

The first workshop, using the strategic questioning exercise, revealed that participants were without doubt that they had undergone and created change at many dimensions of their being, orienting around specific events:

- The breakdown of a long life relationship through the revelation of inconceivable betrayal
- The ending of a long life relationship in determination to live life with deeper integrity and authenticity
- Participating in a day-long learning experience that introduced the participant to an entirely new way of seeing and being in themselves.

What kinds of criteria did we find ourselves using to make the claim that transformation was real at least in these experiences? The participants used their stories as experiential data to create the list already documented as learning outcomes from Part 1, here. The list was agreed as a true representation of their thinking when reported back to them in writing some weeks later.

When we look at the list, which is unusual and reflective of profound life experience, what kind of truth test did we use to substantiate our claim? In its Introduction to the report on evidence of transformation, the Institute of Noetic Sciences (2008, p. 7) quotes its 2007 report:

> Materialist science represented an evolutionary leap from a mind-set that relied on religious authority for verifying truths to one that valued an objective search for knowledge. In this global age of rapid change and transformation, it is time for another such leap . . . [to] include the

rigorous study of subjective, inner experience, a renewed appreciation for meaning and purpose, and a recognition that the world of consciousness is far more mysterious and influential than we have ever imagined.

It seems to me that the participants in our workshop generated criteria for claiming that transformation is real which, in relationship to the Institute's observations, reflect all these moments in history. I can see in our data tracings of religious authority, objective search for truth, a leap to a different way of seeing reality, which includes the subjective and inner experience, the appreciation of meaning and purpose, and the mystery of consciousness.

For example, and referring to the list of learning outcomes, the claim of "witnessing" aligns with a search for objective truth, and heeding "a Call" reflects some spiritual or religious authority. Meanwhile, the references to "leaving behind, reaching and choice" reflect a leaping action, and the "putting into words" denotes something about meaning in a literal way. Lastly, the references to "being in self" and ways of being, including knowing and not knowing, point to the mysteries of consciousness also participating in and constituting a transformative experience.

Our workshop added some new dimensions to the Institute's observations too: that of critical thinking with the emergence of energies of gender, generation, standpoint and pre-configuration; that of stillness (resettling, holding); and that of a shadow-side in the acknowledgement of brutality and grief that accompanies the drive for survival and hard decisions.

Conclusion

To take our work to a simple, practical result I propose that when we aspire to and/or claim that we are working transformatively we consider these criteria as part of our truth testing.

It goes without saying that the details will be immeasurably diverse in any application, but as generic references for knowing what to look for, we can broaden what we may currently use to claim transformation has happened with the following criteria (and again, I acknowledge the life stories, intuitions and reflective analysis of the participants as the source of my inspiration for drawing out this list):

- A new transcendent or spiritual quality
- Observed and quantified physical changes
- Accounts of first hand experiences of transformation
- Renewed identity and purpose at individual, collective and large scales of social organisation
- The public use of new language to communicate new meaning
- The acknowledgement of the power of new consciousness actively participating in the transformation
- The use of critical analysis to make explicit the worldview, political foundations and other governing systemic properties undergoing change
- The explicit valuing of stillness and associated actions such as listening, holding, the presence of place, and stopping
- The inclusion of complex human sciences such as family therapy, depth psychology and transactional work to embrace shadow essential to healthy and sustainable transformation.

Let me finish with an excerpt from a poem by which describes to me how being in transformation can sometimes feel:

Until, at last, a loophole's found

Where lonely figure finds its place

In ground

Where deserted ground extends its space

Through figure

Each finding life

In the care of the other

Where what's good for the life and love of both

Is good for the life and love of each

Despite appearances that seem to teach

The need to preserve against the other's reach

From "Neglect", Alan Rayner, 2009.

Additional notes on "Constellations"

To explain the Constellations practice: an issue is identified and those who wish to participate in its resolution agree to the Constellations approach. A Constellation Facilitator, or team of Constellators, work with the group usually over a full day, sometimes longer.

Originating in family therapy and deployed to enable intergenerational grief resulting from the legacy of the Second World War in Germany, the methodology is now adapted for use beyond family systems to include organisations and whole sectors. As an example, I participated in a large-scale Constellations workshop at the Tavistock Institute, London in 2004 with over 60 participants addressing structural change (school closures) in the UK public education sector.

To give a surface level description of the practice: following extensive preparation for the Constellation event, at the commencement of the event the person who has raised the issue describes it, identifying key powers that are influencing the issue's state of play. Other participants self select to represent these powers. They can be institutional powers (e.g. an education department), specific people (e.g. the Minister) or intangibles (e.g. fear), for example. The cardinal rules are that people do not play their own identities, and that the person with the issue does not participate in the arena.

The idea is for that which cannot be said or heard in the world where the issue is active, to be said and heard here in the arena, and to see how saying it changes the relationships between the elements. Ideally the actual people dealing with the issues in its many dimensions witness the engagement so they take the insights they gained by observation back into the real world.

There is profound skill involved. Each of the facilitators' and participants' choices has an unpredictable systemic consequence to the reconfiguration. The event is completed when an alignment is reached between all the elements and reflective of a new, healed state of affairs.

Bert Hellinger's Constellations papers and methods can be accessed on the Hellinger Institute website (2008). Bert is the originator of this extraordinary methodology.

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Workshopping ideas for social and environmental sustainability: emergent and structured knowing
Jennifer Borrell

A workshop on environmental sustainability and social justice for the ALARA 2009 conference is described in this article, in terms of both process and content. Ideas about emergent and structured knowledge are explored in relation to both the workshop and the broader issue of dealing with climate change, which formed the subject matter for group exploration.

Introduction

Through this workshop I (with colleague, Sharron Lane) was attempting to nut out a very real problem, drawing on the wisdom of others interested in action learning: 'How do we ensure that both social justice imperatives and environmental sustainability are addressed through programs, support mechanisms and ongoing government policy?' To provide some context for this interest - Sharron and I are both researchers with Kildonan UnitingCare, which delivers a household energy efficiency program for people experiencing financial hardship and concomitant difficulty in paying utility bills. It became evident to us in our initial evaluation of the program that social and environmental sustainability are not in perfect sync in every situation, despite the many examples of when they are and when they might be (Borrell, Lane & Fraser 2008, 2009). Thus we aimed to draw on the reflective wisdom of a creative and sincerely interested group of people through our workshop. This was

our first ALARA conference so, for my own part, I was feeling a little unsure: *Would participants feel engaged? Would the workshop process lead to a lively discussion with fruitful ideas? Would people be enriched through the process? Would they have a chance to contribute the best of what they knew and had experienced? Would they have the chance to share this with us and other participants?*

With all of this in mind, the design of our workshop was highly structured – but was it over structured? *What was my stake in providing this level of shape and direction? Was I 'insuring' for certainty?* Dare I suggest – was I 'risk managing'? While feeling a little apprehensive the night before, I read Susan Goff's description of her own ALARA workshop the previous year with some delight and excitement: 'Emergent Knowing: Reflections on a Conference Catalyst Paper and Workshop'. She related:

> 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' presence 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… (2008 p. 21)

Such faith and certainty that knowledge would emerge and take its own directions within the group was impressive as was Susan's confidence in this process in the face of unnamed goals and unknown destinations. In contrast, our workshop was highly structured. This seemed OK too – we would see where it would lead, also in the spirit of 'emergent knowledge'. Our workshop is thus described below.

The workshop process and emergent ideas

As people walked into the room, a comfortable library with sink-in couches and improvised fold-out chairs, they were handed a catalyst paper to read – deliberately framed as a provocation to fire up responses and ideas. It began with:

> Bringing about environmental sustainability and facilitating social justice are not necessarily the same things. Very often and in many ways they may be at odds. This can be demonstrated in a number of ways, both locally and globally. I will concentrate on the local – drawing from experience of Kildonan UnitingCare's domestic energy audit program.
>
> Kildonan's energy audit program grew from the experience of financial counsellors who encountered many people in financial hardship who could not pay their bills. The program works from a clear hardship alleviation objective, even while assisting householders to reduce their energy consumption. On the surface this appears simple and it is in a large sense – less consumption equals lower energy bills, however there are often exceptions. A social justice goal requires equitable access to energy-related health and comfort, for example it would not be considered equitable for an elderly person to spend much of their time in bed because they cannot afford to use their heater. An energy auditor may assist this person to use energy more efficiently and/or to obtain grants and more efficient appliances so that they are not confined to bed, however the total energy consumption may not reduce over time. It is 'just' that the person is free to enjoy the comfort of their own home. There are other types of low income households that may require higher energy use relating to such factors as illness, unemployment, living in a rural area etc. In fact, in general low income households use the least energy. It is high income households that use the most. At the same time low income households spend a higher *proportion* of their income on energy and, consistent with this, have less income for other necessities once energy bills are paid…

The paper continued in that vein, with some examples and conundrums. Participants were also given case studies, adapted from real life stories from Kildonan's energy audit practice as a focus for thought and discussion. My process questions here were: *Did they have too much to read? Was the workshop 'overcrowded' with information and directions?* It may or may not have been so, but the openness, generosity and genuine interest of the participants in embracing the topic of

the workshop was quickly evident – rewarding faith and trust in reflection and reflexivity (or so it seemed) and the deeply human imperatives of human beings to think creatively and make a contribution to common social life and interaction.

To continue in description of the workshop - after finding their places and reading the hand-outs, participants were divided into four discussion groups according to different roles in addressing household energy efficiency/social justice i.e. (i) government policy advisor, (ii) environment advocacy group, (iii) community welfare advocacy group, and (iv) direct welfare service provider. This exercise was intended to generate normative, systemic compartmentalisations in thinking and planning for later whole group discussion in relation to the household case studies. As it happened, there was more similarity across groups than expected, in terms of the priorities and processes arrived at to address the case study scenarios. In teasing this out, one suggested that the group was 'polluted' as ALARA conference attendees already thought in terms of holistic, integrated systemic processes. However, another argued that there were marked differences in ideas and views put forward between the groups i.e. the government group was thinking in terms of systemic approaches, while others were more 'client' focused. Another highlighted the difficulty of discussing tensions between household energy efficiency and social justice through the pre-emptive prism of individual case studies, with the associated requirement to focus at this atomised level (i.e. in identifying key issues and remedial processes as requested). Conceivably, a different level of problematising might lead to a broader focus and set of processes.

One said that *families* need to be advocated for in relation to sustainability to facilitate ground-up policy development

and promote a shift in the way governments operate - toward greater social justice in both policy and practice. Another highlighted that people on low incomes are already the lowest energy users and they don't need (or, implicitly, deserve) 'being finger wagged at'. In fact, they could be rewarded for their frugality in being engaged to teach others about efficient energy consumption. Continuing in this vein, it was suggested that policy makers could raise public awareness about the different perspectives of people in their everyday lives and activities in relation to sustainability, thus furthering environmental and social justice objectives at the same time. A carbon foot analysis of different types of households might be included, which would reveal the low consumption of those who are most economically disadvantaged. Another awareness-raising suggestion was the development of an hierarchical table of energy needs as a conceptual tool, similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

One participant suggested that energy resource savings made in public housing be re-directed to other initiatives that reduce energy consumption. Another advocated 'looking beyond (remedy of deficit) to something dignifying and culturally developing/building' i.e. beyond helping people who are 'disadvantaged' to a program or policy that accords due dignity and affirms culture. In this context, it was pointed out that sustainability can present quite differently in specific cultural contexts, which, of course, has implications for the shaping of community development practice. Also discussed was the capacity to address environmental sustainability conceptualised as a human right.

The discussion ended with an interesting difference of views as to whether action research at a household level i.e. in starting with people's everyday lives in their houses, would necessarily lead to environmental sustainability priorities

and actions. One thought that this would be the case while another highlighted that people in hardship were often living on a day-to-day (survival) basis and busy meeting immediate needs – thus an action research approach would not necessarily lead to sustainability initiatives, even if facilitated by energy efficiency support workers. In line with this, I highlighted that participants in Kildonan's household energy efficiency program were generally engaged due to pressing financial imperatives i.e. in the face of unaffordable bills and, very often, impending utility disconnection. In fact, as noted above, the program grew out of the financial counselling program and the high prevalence of people seeking help who were in this sort of situation….

There was still lively discussion when the time was up, thus we offered to send notes to participants for further comment by email. Unfortunately, it took me many weeks to obtain just some of the required email addresses. Nevertheless I was rewarded with a thoughtful and encouraging reply from Susan Goff, facilitator of the 2008 workshop discussed above. She highlighted the necessity for welfare workers to do their own critical subjectivity development of what sustainability means to them personally and professionally, reflecting on how they integrate sustainability capabilities into their current thinking about welfare practice as they deliver it. She further suggested that if they carry out this inquiry in collaboration with participating families, they are then legitimately working on their own agency as a means of enabling the families, and also learning with and from the families about what sustainability means in the welfare contexts. Yoland Wadsworth's critical reference group construct was proposed as a valid model to underpin a PAR strategy of this nature (e.g. see Wadsworth 1998). Finally, Susan suggested including the final paragraph of the catalyst paper in an article for *ALAR Journal* about this workshop, i.e.:

> Addressing both social justice and climate change needs to be grounded in action-research loops at a grassroots community level, but also at the intersecting and overlapping levels of organisations, industries, government, agriculture, environment groups, and human services (to name a few). Furthermore, we need to find ways of bringing this type of learning more into the mainstream - so that the organically derived and eminently relevant 'data' is what we commonly refer to in deciding our individual and collective directions - especially in relation to social and environmental sustainability.

In fact, this pretty much describes my own motivation and interest and what I wished to learn from others through the workshop i.e. What might these action-research loops look like?; Where would/should they appear and be instigated?; At what levels and through what systemic nodes and processes would they optimally occur?; and How might I and others be agents for consecutive environmental and social sustainability through such action-research avenues?

Concluding reflections on emergent and structured knowing

Later on the same day, I attended Susan Goff's workshop: 'Enabling Emergent Knowledge and Knowing: Second Iteration'. What a wonderful eye opener and subtle life changer that was! Letting go of structure and certainty – with Susan 'holding' a group, while not having a certain end point in sight. At the same time she met consternation with calm equanimity. Various activities were set in place, though it was clear that at least some of these were unplanned. For example: three of us held a conversation on the floor in the middle of the whole group, without a designated topic. (I later realised within the group discussion that I had unnecessarily adopted 'responsibility' for getting the conversation going); I watched Susan pause and close eyes before deciding on a new direction to try; we listened to expressions of discomfort from the group and reflected on that together; we discussed whether all emergent knowledge

is necessarily positive (I think we agreed it wasn't); I participated in conversation without a goal and a spontaneously synchronised 'group hum'.

Having been to a few highly structured workshops since, facilitated by consultants with firm frameworks and prescribed objectives, I have been given pause to ponder on 'closed', 'open' and, perhaps, 'semi-permeable' spaces and processes for optimally creative reflection and learning. In particular, I have become even more interested in exploring open-ended and organic learning that, while resisting pre-emption can be most fruitful. This, of course, requires trust in the process, other people and their 'social intelligence' (the latter which is greater than the sum of its parts, generally speaking). On the other hand, to what degree can this type of approach help us 'manage' the urgent crisis of environmental sustainability along with the perennially pressing issues of social justice and equitable access to health, well-being and the potential to flourish? My conclusion is that it would be most fruitful as part of living and organic action learning and research processes, whereby open and creative processes are 'checked' regularly for all intended and unintended consequences, with subsequent responsive shifts in activities, operations and communications at all systemic levels including the grassroots loci of household and community.

Finally, there is the issue that was implicit throughout much of the workshop discussion and built into the nature of the activities - that is, of 'top down' (structured and managed) versus 'bottom up' (various and emergent) measures to meet the challenges of current and impending climate change. With this in mind, I listened with great interest to futurist Alex Pang talk about and advocate 'tinkering' as bottom up, social, exploratory, open-ended inquiry to generate emergent knowledge (ABC Radio National 2009). He was specifically

asked about its applicability to addressing climate change and I will give him the last word here in the form of his response, as further 'food for thought':

> … it may be possible in today's increasingly information-rich and information technology rich environment, to design these little solutions, these little kind of tinkered solutions that encourage people to do things that governments have had a really tough time doing, and it's been very difficult to mandate through either regulations or taxes. Now whether that's going to be enough is anyone's guess right now. I mean I think probably we're going to end up with a combination of a billion little tinkered approaches to things like energy savings or water savings, combined with a couple of very big top-down kinds of approaches. But I think the important thing is that we now have both types at our disposal, both of which work to some degree of effectiveness, (or) would have, under different circumstances (ABC Radio National 2009).

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Earthy learning and reflection: ALARA Conference 2009

Sharron Lane and Lizzie Bickmore

The following article begins with a reflection on the presentation of the 'upright garden' made at the recent ALARA conference in September. The second section of the article includes the personal reflections of Sharron Lane about the presentation and more broadly, reflections on the Conference and looking forward to the International Conference (2010 World Congress). Lizzie Bickmore then reflects on the changes she has noticed in her conscious reconsidering of the value of action research to her program as a result of her involvement with the conference.

The car arrived on time full of plants, pots, earth, stones and animated boys. We unloaded all the cargo and made our way to the room we were allocated for our session. Unfortunately our room was double booked but we needed to put our soil and plants outside anyway. We set up in the courtyard and waited. Zachariah, a client of the Kildonan 'Grow Your Own Healthy Lifestyle Program' had kindly agreed to come to the conference to share his wisdom. He had gained his knowledge of how to grow an 'Upright Garden'. He was to present a low water, low maintenance, recycled garden that could be adapted to produce a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, with space at the top for flowers!

Zachariah demonstrates setting up an upright garden. Photo: Meg Rodaughan. Used with permission.

We were ready and open to share. No one came to our session. We waited. I rewarded his three boys who had also come to share about their garden at home with hot chocolate drinks and cake. Still no one came. We decided to start making the garden anyway having brought all the cargo and enthusiasm with which to do so. Lizzie and I were open to learning the process. Sometimes it is difficult for people to prioritise opportunities to learn, with so many great sessions that morning. Unfortunately we had been so busy preparing that we were not able to advertise our session in the morning. This may have been a larger mistake than we realised, though our co-worker did let everyone know what we were presenting. Lizzie and I did not know how to make the garden ourselves. We felt if we could learn how to make this inventive garden, we could pass the learning on. One of

the Augustine centre volunteers came and watched and asked about the garden. She took some great photos of us.

Then it was the end of the session and time for morning tea. We were set up right near the tearoom. Engagement with various individuals began to take place as they grabbed their coffees and teas and were intrigued by our work. People began to gather in the small courtyard and Zachariah became animated. Many asked questions and Zachariah faithfully recounted the process he had undertaken to develop the garden. In the end we experienced a high level of engagement with the garden and its learning.

Sharron Lane's Reflections:

One of my reflections on our experience is that sometimes really good ideas can be lost because there is no audience with which to engage and for the idea to gain the necessary momentum. I wondered, in contemplating this, how open are we to new ideas? At times I would argue there is a tension between knowing and learning. Can I explain by stating that at times when we 'know' it can produce a state of unintended inaction. When we 'know' something we have reached a destination, we have arrived at some point. The more we know the more potential there is for us to feel we have reached the ultimate destination (wherever that is.) If I know, why learn? I think a better state of learning is an open style of learning where we concentrate more on all we do not know. In a sense I am conscious of the importance of an open or unknowing state of knowing.

I had never attended an ALARA conference before. I was a novice, though I knew about action learning principles. Another of my reflections on our experience of presenting is: What type of learning is relevant for a national ALARA conference? I wondered whether our earthy and practical presentation had a place amidst the grand and complex

theories and discussions that took place. Looking forward to the International conference (i.e. 2010 World Congress) next year: How will that conference focus on both the theory and practice of action research, without privileging one over the other? Will there be opportunities for practical application of the theories? Can we draw that distinction? The only reason it occurred to me was that I was reflecting on why we had no one attend our session. Can presenters present action research in motion? (This was our intention in our session.) Our aim was to highlight the benefits and challenges of action research as applied to a current social program.

The Kildonan 'Grow Your Own Healthy Lifestyle' worker, Lizzie, did not get to share some of the wonderful stories that highlighted the interactive learning taking place between herself and the families with which she works. The 'upright garden' itself is just one example of the cyclic nature of the interaction in the program. Lizzie learnt how to make this garden from Zachariah and will probably use it in other situations in the program. Lizzie's openness to change roles in this way from teacher to learner and back again shows the necessary qualities vital for action learning. If Lizzie had taken the role of 'expert' she may not have been as open to learn from Zachariah.

My last reflection is this: I wondered whether we were just unable to join what I describe as the conference dance. I had a sense, as an ALARA conference novice, of long continuing discussions and on-going debates that pre-existed the conference. Did no one come to our session because they were already busy dancing the dance? Many people attending the conference were previously connected. My sense was that the dance had been operating for a long number of years. To me the steps seemed both complex and yet as I watched those who knew them, they glided around with ease. I cannot count the number of times assumptions

were made that these were steps 'everyone knew'. Certain information, (such as the name of a significant author) was neatly dropped into the conversation. I did not know these authors. So I ask how you include 'novices' like me in this obviously long and complex dance? At times I felt disengaged from the process just like some on the sidelines of a dance anxious to be asked to join in but somehow the music never slows. I am wondering whether the international ALARA conference could include a stream for novices such as me, about getting to know the steps of the dance – key influences, authors, arguments, and the history of ALARA, and so on.

In conclusion, going back to our session, as so often happens, the process did not turn out as we had anticipated. On reflection and with the assistance of such a basic human ritual as a morning coffee, an audience was found and the process redeemed. I have reflected on both our experience of our session and the conference as a whole in the hope that my questions will create more steps in the evolving process of ALARA. Like Rilke, I am comfortable with my questions hanging in the air as I too hope one day to live into the answers[8].

Lizzie Bickmore's Reflections:

The Grow Your Own Healthy Lifestyle (GYOHL) Project aims to work with families to achieve five main outcomes.

1. Sustainable gardening education and experience,
2. Healthy eating and nutrition education and experience,
3. Healthy family relationships through joint activity,
4. Creating opportunities for community linkages, and

---

[8] Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions. Rilke, Rainer Maria.

5. Increased overall wellbeing.

From the outset of the project there has been a lot of scope in how we go about achieving these things. For me, participating in the ALARA conference made me far more aware of how action learning feeds into this project. It made me eager to further apply it and learn from it. I think project workers need to constantly be discussing and applying the action learning approach, so it remains front-of-mind in their practice. Collaborating and mentoring through research officers and organisations like ALARA can help to achieve this.

I felt that, as project worker for GYOHL, I was subconsciously applying the action learning model. It wasn't something that felt planned or articulated prior, it simply arose out of asking the questions: 'What is your experience with gardening? What would you like to do in your garden?' We did formalise these questions into forms such as the initial family referral form, however it felt like this arose because we were working with people in their own homes and backyards and hence had to be mindful of their wishes as well as being aware that there was a huge amount of green thumbed farmer wisdom floating about in suburban backyards. In that way it felt a very natural approach, and so I was pleased and interested when Sharron explained to me how what we were doing fitted so well into this theoretical model: the 'aha' moment that people talk about.

As a project worker, sometimes it's hard to find the time to stop and reflect on what's happening and seek input. Limited hours and short project times mean there is an enormous pressure to just deliver and 'get the job done.' The logistics of working with lots of families across a wide area

make the temptation to roll out a 'set menu' sometimes seems like an easier option. With action learning it's the old 'journey not the destination' adage but with the twist that the destination does not necessarily exist yet. This brings another challenge for action learning based projects in working out how action learning fits into funding models that are very specifically defined.

I love working with this scope. Scope to evolve, to be creative and to be responsive. We have now demonstrated multi-storey gardening with families and community members at the Coburg Gardens open day. We even modified the design a little as we went, harnessing suggestions from those present, so action learning demonstrates how an idea evolves and can be improved upon. The next adventure is setting up a "pen pals" network between some of the junior green thumbs. This evolved more from an observation of young talents rather then a specific response to a question, request or sharing of knowledge.

About the authors

Sharron Lane is a Research Officer working at Kildonan UnitingCare. Current focus includes evaluation development for Kildonan. Other recent research projects have included collaboration in the major evaluation of Kildonan's energy audit program, work on the early history of the organisation from 1881 and currently a major Bushfire response evaluation.

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Lizzie Bickmore is the project worker for Kildonan UnitingCare 'Grow Your Own Healthy Lifestyle' Project. This project works with 42 families across Whittlesea, Yarra and Darebin. Lizzie has worked across numerous community based food growing projects including the Lalor

Community Garden, Stewart Lodge Wellbeing Garden and previously with the 'Grow and Share' Project.
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Essay: Life, love and suffering – from demanding human rights to appreciating human needs

Alan Rayner

The source of our human capacity to suffer is also vital to our ability to live, love and be loved. By denigrating it, through an unrealistic aspiration to individual or collective autonomy, we aggravate rather than eliminate suffering. By acknowledging it, we allow compassionate wisdom and natural creativity to flourish in our midst.

Autonomous denial

"Breast cancer, I can now report, did not make me prettier or stronger, more feminine or spiritual. What it gave me, if you want to call this a 'gift', was a very personal, agonising encounter with an ideological force in American culture that I had not been aware of before - one that encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune and blame only ourselves for our fate." 'Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World', by Barbara Ehrenreich, Granta, January 2010.

"This notion, which now involves seeing everything natural as an object, inert, senseless and detached from us, arose as part of the dualist vision of a split between body and soul. It was designed to glorify God by removing all competing spiritual forces from the realm of nature...Why do we still think like this? Why can't we be more realistic?" Mary Midgely, reviewing 'The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World', by Iain McGilchrist in Saturday *Guardian*, 2 February 2010.

"You've got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive
Elim-my-nate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mr In-between".

The way we human beings view our capacity to suffer and die profoundly affects the way we understand our relationships with one another and the natural world that we inhabit. Even, and perhaps especially, what many of us view as our most detached and rational ways of thinking may be more rooted in the psychology of fear than a realistic appraisal of our actual situation and natural neighbourhood.

A common way of dealing with something we fear is to try to ward it off or pretend that it doesn't exist or amounts to nothing. In the words of Robert Frost:

> "Nature does not complete things. She is chaotic. Man must finish, and he does so by making a garden and building a wall".

In other words, we may try to eliminate the source of uncertainty and loss that we associate with pain and mortality by imposing the unnaturally definable order of a '*whole* way of thinking' on the wildness around and within our selves. We aspire to be complete, self-sufficient individuals in our own right, capable of extending our dominion – or the dominion of One who we are prepared to subjugate our selves to – to the edge of a completely knowable world in which we can preserve our safe passage forever. We then proceed to embed this aspiration in our logic, theology, science and systems of governance, to the point where we regard its reality as unquestionable. We might even have the temerity to declare that:

> "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness".

Alternatively, we may shift the notion of completeness and autonomy from individual to collective, holding that

> "The whole is more than the sum of its parts." Aristotle

and thereby subordinating the uniqueness of the particular to the requirements of the global in which it is supposedly inextricably embedded and connected, tangibly or intangibly, to all others.

The real truth, however, is that to sustain such ultimately paradoxical belief systems, we have to build them upon a logical foundation that is inconsistent with evidence and does not make consistent sense – the supposition that material form can either be isolated from or is co-extensive with space. For this to be true space would have to be divisible or containable – that is, to stop and/or start at discrete boundary limits, like a sea detached from river or river detached from sea.

> "The river is within us; the sea is all about us." T.S. Eliot

> "This space I can imagine empty, but I cannot imagine the thing without the space." L. Wittgenstein

If natural form was purely material, it could consist of no more than a dimensionless point with no shape or size. If natural form was purely spatial, it would be featureless. If nature consisted purely of solid, massy particles and space wasn't a natural presence, nothing could move. If space was just an infinite emptiness surrounding discrete objects, there would be no place to situate an external source of force to move these objects around. If space wasn't within and throughout as well as around natural form, it wouldn't be possible for form to be distinguishable or to flow as liquid or gas or to have variable qualities of density, bounciness, flexibility and conductivity.

> "The attempt to impose definition on indeterminacy and degree and exception is about the straightest road to mischief I know of - very deeply worn, very well travelled." Marilynne Robinson, The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought
> "In nature, everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute, independent singleness." William Wordsworth

"No man is an island, entire of it self." John Donne

Hence it is inescapable that the natural world of movement and mobility that we sense and inhabit cannot be defined completely into hard and fast categories. There is no absolutely closed form that we know of or can know of. Space is energetically included in form and form in space. Space is an indivisible, indefinable presence of openness everywhere, infinite at all scales, not an empty absence of definable presence within or outside the finite bounds of discrete, active and reactive material objects. In relationship with energetic form, space has a receptive quality that *induces* flow. In relationship with omnipresent space, energetic form has a responsive quality that enables it to flow into place.

This is the understanding of the creative evolutionary wildness of natural energy flow that has been called 'natural inclusionality', to distinguish it from the 'objective rationality' of definitive assumptions that underpin individualism and collectivism, reductionism and (w)holism. According to natural inclusionality, all natural form is variably viscous 'flow-form' – an energetic configuration of space in figure and figure in space. The inherently static logic of discrete definition, which excludes or unnaturally confines the continuous space throughout and beyond all natural distinguishable form, is thereby subsumed by a fluid logic of 'the included middle', where the latter is the seat of dynamic correspondence, not dichotomy, between local figural and non-local spatial presences. These presences combine in dynamically distinct but not isolated bodily identities as natural inclusions of 'everywhere' in 'somewhere'.

Inclusional acceptance

Definitive thinking, driven perhaps most fundamentally by an understandable desire to prevent suffering by imposing an unnaturally discrete order on things, has a very

unfortunate outcome, which actually aggravates instead of alleviating human distress and conflict. By treating suffering as the consequence of *imperfection*, viewed as any absence of regularity or 'spot of bother' either within or outside our selves or natural neighbourhood, it seeks to restore order through the imposition of discrete limits – most often manifest in some form of defensive wall. Since these limits serve 'positively' to preserve the 'ideal' autonomous perfection of individual or group, whatever source of wildness – from volcanic eruption to 'foreign' invasion – appears capable of eroding them is viewed 'negatively' as a flaw or adversary that we must battle against to survive. Yet these very same limits also cut us off from what we actually depend on for dear life, whether we perceive this as Nature, God or both.

> "To be or not to be, that is the question: whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?" Hamlet

So we get caught in a double bind that holds us solely responsible for our behaviour - whereupon we either only have ourselves to blame when we suffer (i.e. there is something wrong *with* us if we suffer – pain and death are the wages of sin, insubordination, bad genes, bad attitude etc) or we blame God/Nature/Evil for making it/allowing it to happen. This leads us to disparage either those who suffer (with whom we have no sympathy because it's their own stupid 'fault') or that/those which seem to inflict or allow suffering. One way and another, we try not to admit (i.e. to exclude/deny) suffering by removing or sealing our bodily selves off from what we perceive as its source. But always at the root of such disparagement/inadmission is the groundless abstract rationalistic assumption that autonomy is 'real', a product either of our self-definition as discontinuous material bodies split apart from space, or group definition within a seamless whole entire of it self.

Natural inclusionality radically changes our perception of the source of human vulnerability and recognizes this also as vital to our ability to live, love and be loved. This source is nothing less than the receptive space and creative potential that all definitive ways of thinking intransigently ignore or deny.

With the recognition that suffering is an inescapable implication of our natural inclusion of and in receptive space, vital to our ability to live, love and be loved, comes a very different attitude. Suffering is not directly attributable to anyone or anything's 'fault', as such, and so should not be disparaged or denied, but alleviated through the receptive and needful capacity for love and care in which it is sourced. We move from angrily declaring our autonomous right to be happy and not to suffer, or serenely denying the distinctness of our bodily selves, to accepting our receptive human need for love and care. This 'need' is our receptive 'negative strength' through which we sustain our lives, not our despicable 'positive weakness'.

This is why the constant demand for 'positivity' and disdain for 'negativity' (as an admission of human need) evident in modern culture is deeply counter-inclusional. Natural inclusionality entails the dynamic balancing of 'positive' and 'negative' flow and counterflow under each other's reciprocal influence through the continuity of receptive space, not the battle for dominion of one against the other as discontinuous forces. To sustain this balance it is vital to include 'Mr In-Between' as the dynamic interfacing that both distinguishes each from other and provides spatial passage between them.

> "You've got to ack-knowl-age ev'ry positive
> Affirm ev'ry negative
> Grant Space of the Inclusional
> And Inter-face with Mr In-between."
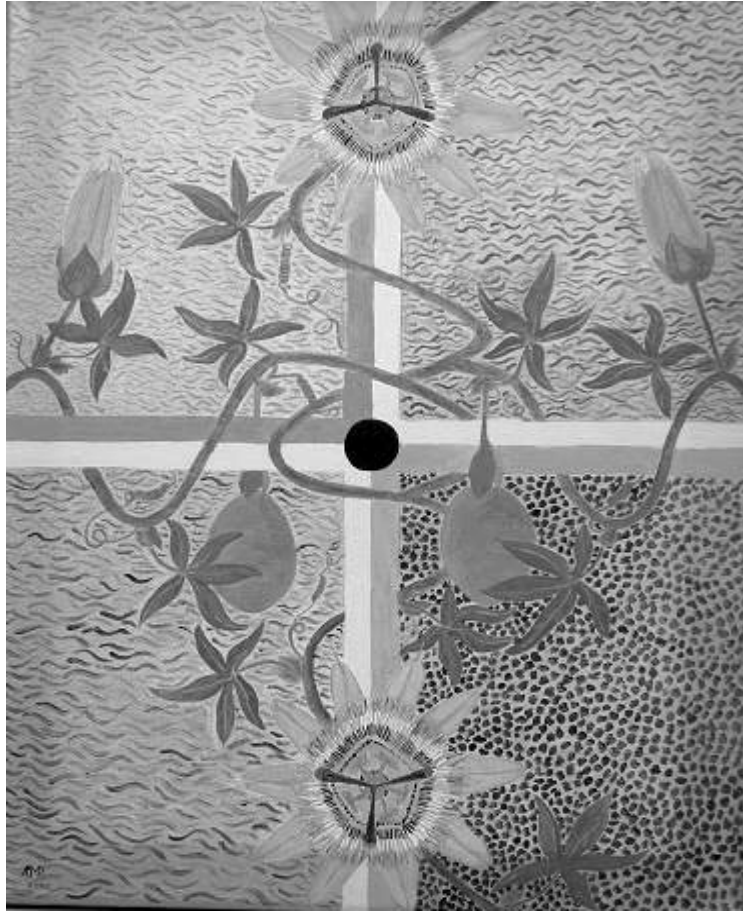> Roy Reynolds (2010)

Figure 1. *"How Compassion fruits"* (From an oil painting by Alan Rayner on canvas, 2008). Life, love and suffering spring from the same source of receptive space that is present within, throughout and beyond the earth, air, fire and water of inspiring and expiring natural flow forms as energetic configurations. These natural figures dynamically balance receptive negative influence and responsive positive influence through the reflective zero-point core of their local and non-local self-identity.

About the author

Alan Rayner is a Reader in Biology at the University of Bath, England and has been an active contributor to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) seminars on Living Theory and has developed a highly original epistemology on 'inclusionality'. Alan is a naturalist who uses art, poetry and a new form of mathematics, as well as

rigorous science to enquire and communicate about our natural human neighbourhood.

Alan will join us at the 2010 World Congress in September as one of our Keynote speakers. For more about his keynote go to http://www.actionresearch.net/ or visit the ALARA website at http://www.alara.net.au and click on World Congress.

ALARA membership information and subscription forms

ALARA relies on membership income to fund entitlements like Journal publications, local events and Conferences.

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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 makes 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/development, etc.; and 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 of ALARA as Affiliates or as Associates.

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For more information about ALARA and its activities please contact us on:

ALARA Inc
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Toowong Qld 4066
Australia

Email: admin@alara.net.au
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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.

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

Guidelines

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

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

and all the associated constructivist methods such as:

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

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

Journal articles may use either Australian/UK or USA spelling and should use Harvard style referencing. Visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_style_(referencing) for more.

Requirements

Written contributions should contain:

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

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- 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

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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?

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