

# ALARj

Action learning and action research journal



Volume 19 No 1 September 2013

# ALAR Journal

Vol 19 No 1 September 2013

*ALAR Journal* is published by the Action Learning,  
Action Research Association Inc (ALARA)

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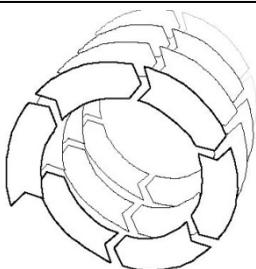
ALARA Inc

PO Box 1748

Toowong, Qld 4066

Australia

[editor@alara.net.au](mailto:editor@alara.net.au)



**ALAR Journal**

**Volume 19 No 1  
September 2013**

**ISSN 1326-964X**

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# **Editorial: Sustainability in our AL-AR works**

**Susan Goff and Phil Crane**

The question of what will remain once an action learning or action research strategy is completed, is a most difficult question and particular to our field. As a community of practice, one of our shared interests is a sense of responsibility for “making a difference”. What we mean by this phrase and how we go about giving such an outcome the best chances of success is a responsibility that preoccupies much of our thinking and practice.

Central to our commitments is a preparedness to ensure our own redundancy as process specialists. It is a measure of our success if we can shift our position as an action research and learning practitioner/educator from high demand to low demand within an initiative’s life time, watching with delight as those who at project initiation knew little about our field come to assuredly grasp its many dimensions and make something of them for themselves.

Whether implicit or explicit, sustainability means that particular values, practices and processes work their way into the fabric of how things are done, with and within agencies, across agencies in programs, in communities and in professional practice. Drawing on Antheil and Spinelli (2011) sustaining change is dependent on sustaining the conditions of learning, and we argue this requires embedding capacities into the living systems in which we work and/or live. This commitment to embedding action learning and action research is a feature wherever we may practice: be it in the childhood or adult educational sector to enrich learner experiences and achievements; be it in geographic communities with people

who accomplish participatory learning and research capabilities to break through local constraints; or be it in organisations where the uptake of action learning and research practices may be embedded in team cultures, policies and systems.

What are we looking for as indications of sustainability? From where does this intention of sustainability originate? By what means do we carry out this responsibility?

In this issue of ALARj we enjoy returning authors who are reporting initiatives in later stages of development, and we also encounter entirely new contributions. In each case, the questions of sustainability preoccupy the authors' reflections and determinations of practice.

Our issue reflects a rich diversity of arenas where these questions are asked: culture, education, crime prevention, sex work, mental health, drugs and alcohol intervention and professional development. The authors walk us carefully through the details of how they attended to understanding the context of the initiative, taking their time to ensure that their orientation and praxis was creating trust, respect and reciprocity before they proceeded with any formal research. The rewards of so doing are evident in the resulting creativity of the methods the authors describe, several of which meld different modes of AR/AL practice. The articles also describe the resources they produce to facilitate the implementation of methods in ongoing action. Finally, if they are able to, our authors account for the qualities of difference their knowledge production craft produces.

Steve Jordan, Christine Stocck and Rodney Mark's article on doing participatory evaluation in Canadian Indigenous contexts is a reproduction, with minor amendments, of their contribution to the ALARA World Congress (2010) with a paper of the same title, previously published in the ALARA World Congress papers (Goff, 2013).

Focussing on program evaluation as an analogue to participatory action research that is grounded in the Cree Nation of Wemindji

principles, cultures and needs for decolonisation, the paper describes the advantages of developing a pre-school evaluation program (“COOL” or Challenging Our Own Limits) that draws on Participatory Action Research (PAR) characteristics. As the authors state:

PAR is unashamedly committed to a politics of equity and social transformation that conventional social science research would dismiss as ideological.

Their argument is that evaluation that is grounded in PAR concepts better serves the needs of Indigenous peoples addressing the inter-generational impacts of colonisation. It does this by both critiquing top-down managerialist approaches to program evaluation which fail to recognise their part in perpetuating colonial oppressions of Indigenous peoples, as well as offering the opportunity for local participants to co-construct an approach to social inquiry that serves their cultural and political needs.

In this mode of development, participatory research progresses Indigenous methodologies in the interests of both decolonisation and self-determination. This paper describes a form of evaluation that contributes to inter-generational social wellbeing both through the program it evaluates and the form of evaluation it uses.

Our second article by Wright, Culbong, Jones, O’Connell and Ford builds on one of the authors’ earlier contribution to ALARj’s special edition on decolonising action research (Wright, 2011). As with their first paper, the new article is firmly grounded in the Nyoongar people’s worldview, but where the first article was robustly theorising an envisioned methodology, the current article describes how that methodology is being realised and creates the means by which the research project can be designed.

This paper clearly illustrates the steps that need to be taken before a research strategy can even be discussed, if it is to produce the sustainable outcomes that funding bodies, researchers and end users need. The project’s intention is to engage Nyoongar in a culturally secure partnership with mental health service providers

to improve the mental health system so it can better serve Nyoongar families living in the south-east metropolitan region of Perth. The authors state:

Real change for Nyoongar people consists of decolonising the structures and systems that continue to traumatise and disempower. Mental health service providers also realize that whilst they are part of the problem, they are necessarily part of the solution. We believe that the Nyoongar Framework achieves this end.

In a very similar way, but in a different arena, Kim and Jefferies' article on insider research carried out by the Australian Sex Workers' Alliance (Scarlet Alliance), draws our attention to the absolute necessity of knowing context in order to establish trust and reciprocity so that participatory research can be conducted. Funded by the Australian Government Attorney General's Department, the intention of the research was to disentangle the relationships between trafficking and migrant sex work. The entanglement disempowers sex workers and causes very significant difficulties for them.

This article details the approach that was taken by the Alliance to recruit insiders (migrant sex workers) as co-designers of the research method, including participating in its delivery. It is an informative and strategically forceful argument advocating for the need for participatory research to work with insiders if it is to have benefits for those whose lives are being researched.

This article is a meticulously detailed description of how this industry engaged its workers in a participatory approach to non-participatory inquiry and capacity building, highlighting the importance of strong engagement, strong ethics and a well-defined inquiry focus. The meaningfulness and sustainability of the project lies in the linking of developing greater understanding with community development:

In addition to the research benefits, perhaps more importantly the research resulted in capacity development and investment in peer education, representation and

autonomy of migrant sex workers of Chinese, Korean and Thai language backgrounds - an invaluable resource for the future of migrant sex worker research.

A dogged refusal to give up has to be one of the seeds of participatory research and action learning sustainability. Our next article is a description of how two ALARA members circle for several years around the problem of sustaining a local conversation group to support action researchers in an Australian regional city.

Lynne and Redman-MacLaren give a most patient and deeply reflexive account of this story. While specific to their regional community, they reach out to many people who, like them, wish to see the outcomes of good conferences do more. They lament that a return from a conference generally means being swamped by a backlog of everyday tasks, and regretted fading of inspiration. In action research and action learning worlds this is not only a loss to the conference participants, it is also a potential loss to future communities with whom conference participants work.

The authors describe their difficulties over the last four years with regard to sustaining a local conversation group, without “burning out” themselves. The reader will see how pertinent this article is to our sustainability theme; as with White et al, the sustainability focus is less on outcomes and more related to maintaining the intervening initiative itself. Where White et al develop a culturally secure framework with which to navigate engagement, Lynn and Redman-MacLaren deploy the concept of “a learning conference” (Louw and Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) as a visionary guide with which to search the details of local group participation. As they say:

By taking this action, we remain consistent with the participative principles of action learning/ research and highlight the value of ALARA engaging the ‘learning conference’ approach for future conferences.

We look forward to future instalments from the Cairns Conversation Group - and others.

Staying with the challenges of deepening the sustainability of existing strategies our next author, Harvey, presents us with a coincidence of participatory action research and participatory evaluation. She presents us with a list of 18 indicators that enable the development and recognition of PAR in higher education – although as she states, their application is not limited to this setting:

The PAR indicator checklist tool has two potential roles as it focuses reflection on the enactment of PAR: to act as scaffolding resource for researchers new to PAR, and to act as a validation instrument for all PAR researchers.

The author ends her article by encouraging readers to use the indicators in other contexts and to test their value for both embedding PAR capabilities and also producing evaluation data with which to account for progress. The enablers allow project participants to track patterns of participation, and to identify structural and other kinds of challenges in their development. This article is a practical response to those looking for a PAR project's starting point, particularly within an institutional setting, and with which to maintain informed communication to insider and outsider interests about its progress.

Staying in the educational domain and with blended methodologies, Cameron and Allen work with Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (“PALAR”, Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) to describe two cycles of inquiry that address low student engagement at a regional university in Queensland. The first cycle explores the issues, and tracks improvements to teaching practice in response to them. Growing from the first cycle of inquiry, a second cycle addresses the students' needs for better recognition and engagement with cultural diversity.

As with other contributors for this issue, the authors address the issue of sustainability by producing a “tool box” of resources and reporting on the efficacy of its items. The educational focus for the students was that of “sustainability” in the environmental sense of the word. This article brings together many of the elements of this

ALARj publication – attending to trust and reciprocity, appreciating the details of specific contexts, working with frameworks for learning, and the production of some lasting resources.

Our concluding article is concerned with an early intervention into a youth homelessness service in East Arnhem (located in the Northern Territory, Australia). Funded by the *Reconnect Program* this Anglicare service is one of more than a hundred Reconnect services across Australia that use PAR as a formally endorsed and embedded element of service development.

Parker reflects of the use of PAR to address drug and alcohol substance use by young people in an Aboriginal community. The author was a manager of the project, and she reflects on how PAR provides a process for building community relationships and developing context-responsive strategies.

Drawing on resources developed by the Reconnect program to support the use of PAR, each cycle of action research contributes to a broader body of knowledge while also attending to evermore-refined “micro” questions that are generated from everyday engagements. Rather than focusing on solving a problem in a technical sense, Parker emphasizes that experience of PAR is key to its transformative powers. As she says – PAR...:

... allows us to explore why it is that people are so energised, angry or driven about the topic at hand.

This article is evidence of how the resources and learning outcomes generated by previous PAR processes contribute to sustaining research and participation in contexts typified by complexity. For many practitioners, this is the best kind of sustainability: the value of PAR is not limited to problem solving but is an ongoing social capital in itself, building service, client and broader community relationships to make a culture which significantly strengthens the capacity of people to work together.

Our journal concludes with Thompson’s entirely fitting review of Zuber-Skerritt and Teare’s publication: “Learning and

Development for a better World: lifelong Action Learning for Community Development” (Sense Publishers).

The book focuses on the relief of poverty in the context of aid work, by using action learning and action research in service to an integration of community development, cross-cultural and lifelong learning concepts and practices. Thompson addresses our current interest in sustainability by suggesting that this approach to aid has two benefits:

It is self sustaining – enabling real progress that will not fall over once interventions stop – and it is self developing – unlocking human potential to deal with the complex and turbulent C21.

He celebrates the authors for their integrity and the broad relevance of their work, which he believes makes a real contribution to transformational scales of change.

In summary – whilst this issue of ALARj presents a diverse array of project reports, we can discern across this diversity the theme of sustainability, a theme which has ethical as well as aspirational dimensions for us all as AL/AR practitioners. Aspects of this ‘sustainability project’ include a commitment to change, to meaningfully involve people over time, having an eye to detail, fostering creativity, embedding action learning and action research qualities into the systems in which we work, producing resources and artifacts that can support communities beyond the confines of a particular project, and articulating models and frameworks that help support the efforts of others. We hope you, as our readers, will be rewarded with practical insights to further these matters in your own work.

All articles have been double blind peer reviewed. We wish to thank the editorial review panel and guest reviewers, as well as the contributing authors for their most valued work.

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# Doing participatory evaluation in Indigenous contexts - methodological issues and questions <sup>1</sup>

Steve Jordan, Christine Stocck and  
Rodney Mark

## Abstract

*In countering the legacies of colonisation, aboriginal communities across Canada are beginning to mount their own locally inspired and developed initiatives in business, health, welfare and education to address needs that they have identified. This paper reports on one such initiative created and launched by the Cree Nation of Wemindji (in Quebec, Canada), called COOL (Challenging Our Own Limits) or Nigawchiisuun.<sup>2</sup> The paper briefly outlines the creation, development and implementation of COOL and the theoretical and methodological framework that supports the project. The paper is organized into three sections. First, a brief background and discussion of the origins, impetus and eventual launch of COOL; second, a general theoretical framework situating participatory evaluation (PE) in relation to the broader field of participatory action research (PAR); and third, the implications and potential of this methodology for indigenous research. The paper concludes with remarks on participatory evaluation as an indigenous alternative to mainstream program evaluation and related managerial technologies.*

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper appeared in Goff, S (Ed), 2013, *From Theory to Practice; Context in Praxis. 8th Action Learning, Action Research and 12th Participatory Action Research World Congress Proceedings 2010 Melbourne Australia*

<sup>2</sup> <http://cool-wemindji.ca/vision/index.html>

*Keywords: PAR, participatory action research, participatory evaluation, Indigenous research methodology, after school programs*

## **Introduction**

Despite a recent apology for the trauma caused by the imposition of residential schools (Minister, 2008), the legacy of colonisation for First Nations and Inuit people by the Canadian state continues to be felt in their communities. As research produced by government commissions, scholars and activists has shown, this legacy has amounted to genocide, racism, expropriation of their traditional lands, and forced migration, as well as the kidnapping of native children and their placement in residential schools until the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The effects of these events on aboriginal people, whether urban or on designated reserves, has had profoundly negative implications for their lived experience of Canadian society. The legacies of colonialism are particularly visible in several areas: in education where their children still struggle to meet levels of attainment achieved by their southern peers (Battiste, 2005); in health where many communities are confronted by an emerging epidemic of diabetes (Boston et al, 1997); and in socio-economic status, with growing poverty and its attendant social problems (Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003).

In countering these legacies of colonisation, aboriginal communities across Canada are beginning to mount their own locally inspired and developed initiatives in business, health, welfare and education to address needs that they have identified and that are organised and delivered from their own particular cultural standpoint and experience. This paper reports on one such initiative created and launched by the Cree Nation of Wemindji (in

Quebec, Canada), called COOL (Challenging Our Own Limits) or Nigawchiisuun.<sup>3</sup>

The paper will briefly outline the creation, development and implementation of COOL over the past five years and will discuss the theoretical and methodological framework that supports the project. COOL. In this respect we will argue that the participatory evaluation we conducted of COOL represents a potentially fertile approach to research in indigenous contexts. We have organised the paper into three sections. First, we present a brief background and discussion of the origins, impetus and eventual launch of COOL as a pilot project in 2004-5. Second, we provide a general theoretical framework situating participatory evaluation (PE) in relation to the broader field of participatory action research (PAR). Third, and perhaps most importantly, we consider the implications and potential of this methodology for indigenous research. Last, we will provide concluding remarks on participatory evaluation as an indigenous alternative to mainstream program evaluation and related managerial technologies.

### **COOL (Nigawchiisuun)**

COOL, or Nigawchiisuun in Cree, first began operating in the Cree Nation of Wemindji in January 2005. Wemindji is a small community of approximately 1300 on the eastern coast of the James Bay. It is one of nine such communities with a total population of just over 10,000 Cree.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://cool-wemindji.ca/vision/index.html>



Figure 1 Map of Cree Nation territories

From its inception, it has been a locally funded and administered after-school care program that provides places for children from kindergarten age up to grade four (future plans include expanding the program to include older children). The program evolved in response to growing concerns in Wemindji that Cree children and youth were not being served well by existing social and educational programs. Indeed, as the Mianscum report (Mianscum, 1999) made clear, these were concerns that were also shared by other Cree communities in the James Bay. Within Wemindji, however, it was at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual General Assembly held in 2000 that issues around children and youth came into sharp

focus. In particular, workshops that addressed issues concerning youth and children highlighted a number of pressing concerns including: the need for more community activities; the lack of parenting skills; vandalism; low retention rates; poor student achievement at the elementary level; negative attitude towards self, others and school; poor study habits; and substance abuse. Discussion of these issues at the Assembly led to the passing of a motion that mandated the creation and expansion of social programs and services for children and youth within Wemindji. The recommendations of a report issued by the Principal of the Maquatua School, on alcohol and drug abuse, gave further impetus to a collective recognition that something had to be done within the community.

Despite regional initiatives (such as Mianscum) and the reports that flowed from them, there was no clear evidence of any concrete action plan emerging to tackle the problems that had been identified within the nine Cree communities of the James Bay. Consequently, Band Council leaders in Wemindji decided to take the initiative and develop their own locally conceived response to the concerns and problems identified in the 17<sup>th</sup> General Assembly workshops, the Mianscum report and other consultations. Led by Chief Rodney Mark and members of the Band Council a decision was made to generate a vision statement that would both guide and provide a framework for the development of future policy making that expressed Cree culture, traditions, customs and knowledge. The project that emerged from this initiative became known as, "Revitalizing and Strengthening Our Traditional Philosophies and Principles Towards Building Strong Governance, Administration and Accountability Systems." This project, from which COOL was to emerge, aimed to develop a transparent process for local governance that was anchored in Cree language, culture and customs. A key indicator of success for the project was to involve as many of the community's approximately 1300 members as possible, particularly in the various rounds of consultations that were envisaged as a key element in generating the particularly Cree orientation of the initiative.

COOL was, therefore, generated from within a much broader governance project based on locally defined Cree values, customs, traditions and forms of knowledge (Stocek and Mark, 2009). In particular, a series of band initiatives, flowing from the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values Project*, were conducted that eventually led to the establishment of a COOL committee composed of band and community members responsible for overseeing its design, development, implementation and evaluation.

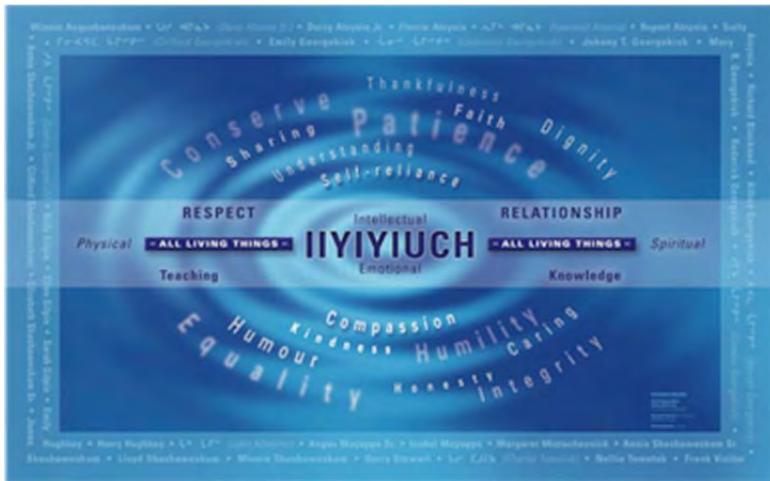


Figure 2: Representation of COOL

Led by Chief Mark, the COOL committee initiated a consultation process with parents, Elders and community members to determine how the principles and values identified in *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values* could be best integrated and made effective within the after school program that was to become COOL (Figure 2).

One of the key questions confronting the participatory evaluation we conducted was how to determine whether or not these principles and values were being realised within COOL through, for example, its organisation, teaching and learning, animation, children's play, or relationship to the local school and wider

community. It was within this broader context that COOL was launched in January 2005.

The aims and objectives of COOL were outlined by Chief Mark in 2004. In particular, he noted that, “[COOL was] to further enhance the development of our children in their intellectual, emotional & physical well-being. Spiritual well being is an outcome of achieving an interconnected, interdependent balance of intellectual, emotional and physical well being” (Mark, 2004). Translating this vision into practice, the COOL committee (established to oversee the program) identified a set of program objectives to guide the future orientation and growth of COOL. These program objectives centred on *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values* (Figure 2) which included a range of social, personal and spiritual practices explicitly drawing on traditional Cree forms of knowledge, understanding and experience that would be foundational for young children participating in the program. In this respect the COOL program was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Chief and his community to formalise and entrench a set of learning practices for young children considered to be foundational for reproducing Cree language, culture and traditions.

As noted above, the program has been overseen by a COOL committee, chaired by Chief Mark, members of the band council, parents and community members. They are a dynamic group of young people in their thirties who are drawn from a range of professional occupations (e.g. the project coordinator of local health services; the project manager of Twaich Development Corporation; a secondary school teacher; an employment officer; and the Chief and his Deputy). While they are primarily concerned with overseeing the implementation and development of COOL, they are also responsible for closely monitoring and acting on findings emerging from the participatory evaluation which they

commissioned Dr Steve Jordan and Christine Stocek (a graduate student), to design organise and implement.<sup>4</sup>

While COOL initially began operating in the local school, it was eventually moved to the community's newly constructed sports arena where it is still based. As we have seen, although it was structured around *Wemindji liyiyiuch Core Values*, it also exhibited several organisational features that were common to other after school programs. For example, COOL ran throughout the school year during afternoons from 3-6 pm. It offered 30 places to children (kindergarten to grade four) for a fee of \$30 per week. Aside from the COOL committee that was composed of the Chief, his deputy and several parents, the core of the program's staff were a project manager and 3-5 facilitators, all of whom were young women in their early twenties (some of them parents) drawn from the community. Facilitators worked closely with the children, directing play as well as conducting day-to-day planning of COOL program activities. In addition, they also collaborated with and supervised the two teenage animators from the school who supported their work. It should be noted at this point, that for the purposes of the evaluation of COOL, the project manager and facilitators were trained in qualitative research methods, thus endowing them with dual roles as educators and researchers/evaluators (their role in the COOL evaluation will be outlined in more detail later).

## **Principles of Participatory Evaluation**

The proliferation of forms of program evaluation during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continues unabated into the 21<sup>st</sup>. Indeed, program evaluation has not only spawned a massive literature in North America consisting of how-to manuals, technical publications, and academic journals, it is now a multi-billion dollar

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<sup>4</sup> This study was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC grant # 856-2005-0027). We would like to express our gratitude to SSHRC for their generous support.

industry which has paralleled the spread of neo-liberal globalisation. Within this context, in an era of accountability, performativity, and value-additions, program evaluation has increasingly become a technology of surveillance, social regulation and extra-local ruling (Smith, 1994) centred on sustaining the social relations of neo-liberal accumulation. As a technology of power, program evaluation has achieved this extension through legions of consultants, researchers and professional program evaluators who have utilised an equally vast array of methodologies and practices shared by multi-national corporations, national governments, international agencies (such as the World Bank), Universities, and NGOs.

While we will make some more observations on these developments later in the paper, for now we draw attention to this genealogy (in the Foucauldian sense) to indicate our critical stance towards, and departure from, a traditional program evaluation approach in evaluating COOL as an after-school program. In adopting a participatory evaluation (an oxymoron for those engaged in the conventional program variant), we wanted to signal an explicit commitment to research that was both participatory and inclusive, as well as sensitive to the particular indigenous context in which it was to be conducted. We also wanted to indicate that what was to be evaluated would not be done using conventionally accepted practices in program evaluation, but would be both experimental and exploratory in mapping out principles and practices that derived from a very different onto-epistemic conceptual terrain. As we show below, this approach was grounded in participatory action research (PAR).

Over its relatively short history the development of PAR has been marked by an ongoing debate among its practitioners over what aims, principles, and practices should be used to conduct social research. This debate has not only turned on substantial theoretical and political differences between practitioners, but on questions of methodology and the social organisation of the research process

itself. In this respect it is important to remember that PAR consists of an amalgam of methodological approaches that, together or in different combinations, have produced an orientation to social research rather than a distinct methodology per se (Jordan, 2003). PAR has drawn on a wide array of theoretical paradigms within the social sciences that encompass both mainstream positivist approaches (drawn from social psychology or sociology), as well as critical traditions such as Marxism and critical theory. While these theoretical traditions have been important, the emergence and development of PAR has also continued to be informed and shaped by practice in the field. Such practice has been generated by anti-colonial movements, popular and community struggles, transformative adult education initiatives, and more recently feminism and the new social movements (e.g. environmentalism, gay and lesbian groups, anti-globalisation protesters). One of the defining characteristics of PAR from its beginnings, therefore, is the centrality of this dialogical relationship between theory and practice. Indeed, unlike grounded theory (Glaser, 1968) which aspires to be a quasi-scientific methodology (Burawoy et al, 1991), PAR is an organic, praxis-based methodology that has deep roots in the actuality of peoples' everyday struggles. From this praxis-based methodology have emerged a number of principles that have come to define PAR (Hagey, 1997, Hall, 1992). We outline three of these key principles below.

The first is that PAR has tended to eschew conventional (i.e. positivist and structuralist) forms of social scientific research in favour of more critical or non-positivist approaches. As Smith (Smith, 1990) has noted, this has its origins in a critique and rejection of conventional social science research as a form of cultural imperialism that continues to be shared by a wide range of groups within both developed and less developed countries. The essence of this critique is that conventional forms of social science research - particularly those that employ quantitative methodologies - tend to generate knowledge-making practices that legitimate class inequality under capitalism.

In particular, the hierarchical organisation of the social sciences, their procedures for data collection and analysis, and rigid adherence to the separation of researcher and subjects in the pursuit of objectivity, are seen to produce forms of knowledge that express the relations of ruling (Smith, 1994). Consequently, qualitative approaches are favoured on both technical and ideological grounds. As a collection of techniques or methods they resonate with indigenous epistemologies through their emphasis on holistic perspectives, but also through their openness to narrative or storied representation of the social (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). They are also better suited to small-scale, local studies that are accessible to participation by the communities in which they are conducted. In this respect they are less susceptible to colonisation by outside experts. Non-positivist forms of interpretive inquiry are also preferred because they hold the potential for marginalised groups to have greater access to - and thereby have a voice in - the research process than do quantitative methodologies. Used within a participatory process, qualitative methodologies also encourage engagement in nascent forms of reflexivity, as well as providing tools to stimulate local discursive practices and group activities that constitute PAR.

A second theme that characterises PAR is that it is openly political. Its politics is evident in several ways. It is political in the sense that its practices have emerged from a critique of western social science methodologies viewing these in many instances as cultural imperialism (Said, 1993, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This theme is also expressed through its commitment to work *with* (as opposed to *on*) subordinate, marginalised, and oppressed groups to change their circumstances within society. This stems from the recognition that the social is constituted by asymmetrical power relations in the workplace, the family, education and, more broadly, within politics and civil society that systematically generate inequalities between individuals and groups. The recognition that these inequalities are endemic to capitalist societies, especially so in an era of neo-liberal globalisation, has produced a strong ethical stance that research should focus on issues of social justice. Arising

from this stance, PAR has also been equally committed to democratic engagement/activism, transparency and openness, a strong co-operative and communitarian ethos, inclusion and a clear conviction to issues connected with sustainability. These core values have made PAR a particularly flexible methodology, adaptable across a broad range of issues and contexts.

However, what distinguishes PAR from other research methodologies that share a similar ethics is that:

... it has been demonstrated time and time again that the application of the researches of others (especially positivist research, which blithely claims or assumes universal applicability) in new social, cultural, and economic contexts is unlikely to work. *People must conduct substantive research themselves on the practices that affect their own lives.* (McTaggart, 1991/*italics added*).

Thus, unlike conventional forms of research methodology where authority is vested in the researcher-academic, PAR aims to shift responsibility for the research process on to individuals and groups who are directly affected by these inequalities. Kapoor (Kapoor and Jordan, 2009) for instance, argues that the only way to ensure that a PAR process is initiated and sustained is for academic researchers to continually work at embedding all aspects of participatory research in a living praxis, where participants learn to take control and academic researchers become 'willing hostages' to their concerns. Insofar as professional researchers have a role within PAR, therefore, it is to set their expertise alongside the lay knowledge, skills and experiences of people who are the focus of their investigations. In this way the research process is conceptualised as an encounter, where equal partners meet, enter into dialogue and share different kinds of knowledge and expertise on how to address issues of exploitation, oppression and justice. In this respect PAR is unashamedly committed to a politics of equity and social transformation that conventional social science research would dismiss as ideological.

Last, the politics of equity and social inclusion that PAR has engaged in has had direct implications for the kinds of theoretical traditions on which its knowledge-making practices have historically been constituted. This orientation has led to the adoption of theoretical paradigms that have embraced some form of critical theory (e.g. critical ethnography (Jordan, 2002) or Freirian critical pedagogy (Fals Borda, 1969). This has also included versions of Marxism and neo-Marxism, feminism, post-colonial critiques, postmodernism, cultural studies and indigenous methodology that have generated some of its key conceptual practices. For example, Freire's (Freire, 1972) concept of conscientisation, Gramsci's (Gramsci, 1974) notion of hegemony, the feminist analysis of patriarchy (Smith, 1990), or the indigenous idea of 'researching back' (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) have either influenced, or directly shaped, the forms of social organisation that practitioners have used to conduct PAR.

## **Indigenous Research and Jagged worldviews**

Through its adoption of qualitative, non-positivist methodology, its political commitments, and its engagement with forms of critical social theory, scholars such as Sinclair (2003) have argued that:

Participatory research presents a non-directive, holistic approach to community research and action. For Indigenous communities, disempowered by western research hegemony, the crucial concepts of PAR include respect of indigenous knowledge and worldviews, indigenous epistemology, respect and inclusivity in the research agenda [...] PAR combats intellectual imperialism through its grassroots approach to supporting and nurturing the reconstruction of indigenous knowledge, and by operating on the assumption that knowledge and action that originates with the people, will be the most effective in addressing the problems of the people. These tenets are most closely aligned with indigenous science [...] PAR does not demand the separation of the mind, body, and spirit; rather these are viewed as legitimate ways of information

gathering, and coming to knowledge. Problem solving is placed within the hands of those most affected [...] Participatory Action Research, with its emphasis on participation and hence, personal empowerment, can only invoke the life force. (p. 5)

As will become evident in what follows, the PE we have constructed for COOL is indebted to these principles, as it is to the research of others in the field of participatory methodologies (Kapoor and Jordan, 2009), in an attempt to include indigenous research agendas. Consequently, in this section of the paper we are concerned with elaborating on how these principles can be used by indigenous communities to construct approaches to research that better reflect their needs and aspirations.

Participatory evaluation facilitates improvements and generates knowledge as it asks people to purposefully spend time thinking about what they are doing and why. PE is concerned with making research and its results meaningful and useful to the people involved, so that they will be better informed when making future decisions and taking action. PE often includes people directly in the process from beginning to end, whether in constructing research questions, or collecting and analysing data. Participation of this nature democratizes the research process as it is organized in an emerging and on-going manner in order to empower the voices of the people who will be most affected by the programs being evaluated. Thus, an outside evaluator does not set research agendas, they evolve through a collaborative process. PE responds to needs, interests and concerns as primary users identify and focus the process on outcomes that they think are important and that matter to the community. The evaluator does not assume the role of the expert but instead may be part teacher, facilitator, collaborator and participant in the process. When participants collaborate with the evaluator, establishing the questions to be asked, ways used to collect the information, how to understand what the information means, as well as analyzing and understanding the conclusions drawn, participants become empowered in an active sense and begin to take ownership of the

PE process. Most crucially for indigenous peoples, self-determination and self-governing processes are engaged.

PE methods emphasize the importance of the design and planning process, viewing it as interconnected and educative within the evaluation process itself. This encourages participants to be responsible to themselves and their community first. As we illustrate with *word pictures* below, care is taken to generate and distribute results in ways that can be easily grasped and used to make decisions concerning issues or to improve the programs under evaluation. The goal is to provide knowledge that is based on issues and questions that grow from the groups concerned, focusing on program improvement, not judgment-making that is often associated with conventional program evaluations. As the PE evolves, participants can assume more control, using the evaluator as a sounding board. However, for this to be effective, the evaluator must be immersed in the evaluation process. To meet these goals, evaluation has to be a continual, on-going process. As the evaluation progresses, changes happen as people reflect on customary or taken-for-granted practices than they might otherwise have done. Also, the evaluation process itself may evolve, changing with the participants.

From the very beginning, the Chief and COOL committee were concerned to ensure that a comprehensive PE process was built into the development of COOL that reflected local needs and aspirations, particularly as these were expressed in the *Wemindji Iiyiyiuch Core Values*. With these in mind, and in consultation with the two external researchers from McGill University (Steve Jordan and Christine Stocck), it established several, interrelated, objectives for the evaluation. Foremost among these was the objective to construct COOL as a self-sustaining program, founded on *Iiyiyiuch Core Values*, that could be used as a model for future capacity building within the community for future programs aimed at children and youth. In this respect it not only had to provide systematic and on-going training for the manager and facilitators in project management, it also had to build capacity in

participatory evaluation. Closely enmeshed within this overriding objective were the following: to stimulate a sustained dialogue on community development and social programs; to foster a collaborative approach to community development initiatives that would reflect the community's *Iiyiyiuch Core Values* by engaging local knowledge networks on social and educational issues; to develop and adapt innovative research processes used in the PE of COOL for future social and educational programs in the community; and last, to enhance capacity for creating forms of Cree social capital that would contribute to the future development of the community's social and educational programs with a view to self-determination and governance.

These objectives, therefore, have informed the development of PE used to evaluate COOL over the past five years. In line with the alternative and exploratory character of PE we have attempted to construct novel approaches in the conduct and practice of the research that would be flexible enough to accommodate the very different literacy levels and educational experiences of facilitators working on the program. With the exception of one young man, facilitators were invariably young women from the community, a number of whom had not completed high school or any form of post-16 training and education. Nevertheless, they have been crucial to the evaluation as they do not only run COOL on a day-to-day basis, but have been trained as participatory evaluators. Consequently, early on a decision was made to train the facilitators in PE methods that would have three objectives: i) allow Cree to be used as the dominant language of the research process; ii) to avoid reliance on methods of recording data as written texts e.g. entries to journals and; iii) create a strong sense of solidarity and team work.

To realize these objectives we decided to adopt evaluative methods that primarily relied on visual, photographic, materials. While facilitators did keep field journals to record textual data, extensive use was made of digital *Fuji Finepix* cameras (provided to every facilitator) that allow photographs, with attached audio recordings,

to be taken. Through a series of workshops, facilitators were encouraged to take photographs of everyday events, activities, objects and situations that they considered represented either a COOL highlight or lowlight (Orlick and Orlick, 2006). They were then asked to make short audio recordings for each photograph, describing their own impressions and thoughts.

The purpose of this exercise was to encourage facilitators to attach their voice and words to the photograph as a way of contributing to and re-framing the actual picture they had taken beyond its purely visual components. Placing the photographer in the picture in this way we hoped to create a self-reflexive awareness of the broader social relations that constituted COOL within the community. These word pictures then became the primary source of data that we began to assemble as part of our evaluation. In many respects these photographs defined the PE process, as they have acted to focus and engage facilitators and external researchers in a range of activities, from camera use workshops to data analysis seminars, dissolving social distinctions and creating a strong sense of collective identity. They have also formed the basis for a digital archive which we have used to systematically document the development of COOL over the past five years.

Thus, unlike traditional forms of program evaluation which impose change from above (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, Stronach and Morris, 1994) the participatory evaluation of COOL sought to effect change that arose out of consensus building processes from below. Conventional program evaluation also differs from PE in its essentially managerialist aims and objectives, typically expressed in the ubiquitous needs assessment analyses that it mandates, as well as promulgating a discourse that is anchored in southern concepts of individualism, private property rights, efficiency, performativity and productivity (i.e. capitalism). It reproduces what Leroy Little Bear has called 'jagged worldviews' within aboriginal communities (Battiste, 2000). In this respect conventional forms of program evaluation can be understood as powerful tools of neo-colonisation by exerting technologies of

extra-local ruling that either limit or negate processes of decolonisation and self-determination (Cooke and Kothari, 2000).

Drawing on the key principles of PAR outlined above, PE offers not only a profound critique of the powerful technologies associated with program evaluation, but also provides an alternative methodological paradigm within which to construct forms of social inquiry that are compatible with the parallel processes of decolonisation and self-determination i.e. indigenous methodology.

One question we are invariably asked after making conference presentations - usually by mainstream program evaluators - is 'How do you measure the success of COOL?', or more specifically, 'What are its success indicators?' In responding to these questions we have pointed to a number of key indicators, including: strong support for COOL from parents with children in the program; the fact that teachers in the local school have noticed how children participating in COOL are calmer and better behaved; or the promotion of healthier practices, such as the elimination of junk food from children's diets.

However, such questions are typically generated from within a conventional program evaluation paradigm. Concepts such as 'measure,' 'success,' and 'value' are conceptual practices that are either fundamentally contradictory to the underlying methodological orientation of PE and/or indigenous epistemology. If these very comfortable concepts are not engaged with critically, however, PE stands to be co-opted by forms of program evaluation that will subvert the dual processes of decolonisation and self-determination (Jordan, 2003).

In addressing these questions, therefore, we have been disinclined to respond with a discourse that draws on managerialist notions of measurement, success, performance, productivity and so on. Rather, our argument is that as conventional forms of program evaluation serve only to reproduce the jagged worldviews of (neo) colonialism within aboriginal communities, indigenous peoples

must - in collaboration with other researchers - attempt to generate alternative epistemological concepts and paradigms for research that draws on indigenous knowledge, values, experience and understanding for their inspiration, as well as critically engaging dominant knowledge producing systems of the social sciences. This would mean, for example, a shift away from the positivist and quantitative concepts we described earlier, to historical and qualitative indicators that are able to capture the reality of aboriginal life in all its complexity.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) has argued for this kind of approach, with the potential benefits of 'researching back,' in the same tradition as 'writing back' or 'talking back', that have served post-colonial or anti-colonial discourses. These processes have involved a 'knowingness of the colonizer' and a 'recovery' of indigenous people's knowledge, an analysis of colonialism and a struggle for self-determination. Thus, "Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized" (p. 7). As we have argued in this paper, PE as a research process can be understood as a counter-hegemonic research methodology, where dominant forms of research, such as program evaluation, can be opened up to provide new spaces for aboriginal peoples to *research back*. In doing so, they can re-negotiate and re-organize the nature of their collaborative relationships with external researchers, and also begin to assert the primacy of their own epistemological paradigms in the respective context(s) of decolonisation and self-determination that they may confront in Canada. In this respect, we agree with Absolon and Willett (2004) that:

Aboriginal research must have contexts that acknowledge both our cultural and colonial history. Such variables as knowledge of history, culture and contemporary contexts affect process and research outcomes, in turn, affect policy, programming, practice and societal perception. Renewal in Aboriginal research processes and methodology requires strength and pride in self, family, community, culture, nation, identity, economy, and governance. (p. 12)

We would argue that, handled correctly, PE constitutes a powerful and alternative research methodology that can – and, we believe, must – be adapted to meet the special needs of aboriginal communities in dealing with the dual historical processes of decolonisation and self-determination in the contemporary period. The PE we have conducted of COOL over the past five years is, in our opinion, but one example of how this challenge might be engaged.

## **Concluding remarks**

One of our key arguments throughout this paper, therefore, has been that conventional forms of program evaluation should not be used in Aboriginal communities. In particular, we have noted that its key conceptual practices are derived from an onto-epistemic imperative derived from conventional social sciences. As we have shown above, this translates into a concern with measurement and evaluation (i.e. “valuing”) that is primarily positivist and quantitative in character. Further, in an era of neo-globalisation, this disposition perpetuates and reproduces technologies of power that are fundamentally concerned with management, control, efficiency, performance, productivity and value-added (i.e. profit maximization). Last, in an era of neo-liberal globalisation, program evaluation reproduces social relations and practices that perpetuate neo-colonial patterns of extra-local ruling, whilst also undermining projects aimed at self-determination.

We have also argued that participatory evaluation (PE) can be seen as a powerful, alternative, approach to conventional program evaluation, particularly when working within Aboriginal contexts and communities. In drawing explicitly on key principles and practices that have defined PAR over the past half century – in particular: a non-positivist qualitative methodology, an engagement with critical theory, and a commitment to social justice – we have attempted to show how participatory evaluation provides a methodology that simultaneously offers a critique and an alternative to managerialist forms of program evaluation that

are typically deployed by external consultants in evaluating social programs.

These principles and practices were consistently used in constructing our PE of COOL (Nigawchisiisuun) over the past five years. As we have shown, the PE of COOL that we have been developing has had several key characteristics. First, the training in PE that Cree facilitators had to undergo aimed at building research skills, competencies and knowledge in conducting social research from a standpoint that is respectful of the local community (i.e. that was Cree). Second, COOL engaged in a Freirian process of conscientisation, which aimed to build awareness among facilitators, parents and the wider community of the benefits of developing an autonomous social program that was inspired by Cree traditions, forms of knowledge, customs, and values. Third, PE deliberately eschews the top-down, managerialist methodologies of conventional program evaluation and the “jagged worldviews” that it reproduces as a technology of social regulation. Fourth, PE is a methodology that has the potential to subvert the (neo) colonialist agenda of mainstream program evaluation, while also articulating with broader processes of self-determination and decolonisation. Last, it is for these reasons that we argue that PE can be considered a promising, green field site, which has the potential to mark out new pathways for exploring indigenous methodologies.

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## About the Authors

**Steve Jordan** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education and also holds an appointment in the Faculty of Medicine. He teaches and conducts research on PAR, Indigenous Research Methodologies, and Adult Education.

**Christine Stoeck** graduated with a PhD in December 2012 from McGill University. She currently teaches at the Concordia University and conducts research with Cree communities in the James Bay, Quebec.

**Rodney Mark** was recently re-elected Chief of the Cree community of Wemindji in the James Bay.

# Making a difference: Engaging both hearts and minds in research practice

Michael Wright, Margaret Culbong,  
Tanya Jones, Margaret O'Connell  
and Danny Ford

## Abstract

*This paper discusses the findings and the research process undertaken thus far for the Looking Forward Aboriginal Mental Health Project. The primary aim of the project is to engage with both the mental health service providers and the Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community living in the south-east metropolitan region of Perth to effect positive system change in terms of service provision for Aboriginal (Nyoongar) families living with mental health issues. The paper includes a background to the project and our interpretation of participatory action research in an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) context, an overview of the impact of colonisation on Nyoongar people, an account of what it means to be Nyoongar, a discussion of the methodology for the project, the research process highlighting the critical roles of advocacy and activism taken on by the project team in working with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people, and examples of our work that we believe will assist researchers in ensuring their research practice is both respectful and responsive when working with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous research methodologies, cultural worldview, strengths-based research, participatory action research, decolonizing research methodologies, activism, empowerment, community consultation, community-based research, Nyoongar Elders*

## Introduction

This paper will discuss the findings and the research process undertaken thus far for the *Looking Forward Aboriginal Mental Health Project*. The primary aim of the project is to engage with both the mental health service providers and the Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community living in the south-east metropolitan region of Perth to effect positive system change in terms of service provision for Aboriginal (Nyoongar) families living with mental health issues.

Through our consultations with Nyoongar people they indicated to us that Mental Health Services need to be delivered in a way that demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of and respect for an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) cultural worldview. Mental Health Services will need to show that they have an understanding of an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) ontological worldview (Nyoongar ways of knowing) and an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) epistemological worldview (Nyoongar ways of doing).

The Aboriginal participants in our project are mostly Nyoongar people, living in the suburbs along the south-east corridor of Perth. Nyoongar country runs from north of Perth to just below Geraldton, east of Merredin and to the south east to Esperance on the Western Australian coast (see figure 1). Nyoongar people comprise 14 clans spread across the south-west region of Western Australia.

(See map overleaf)

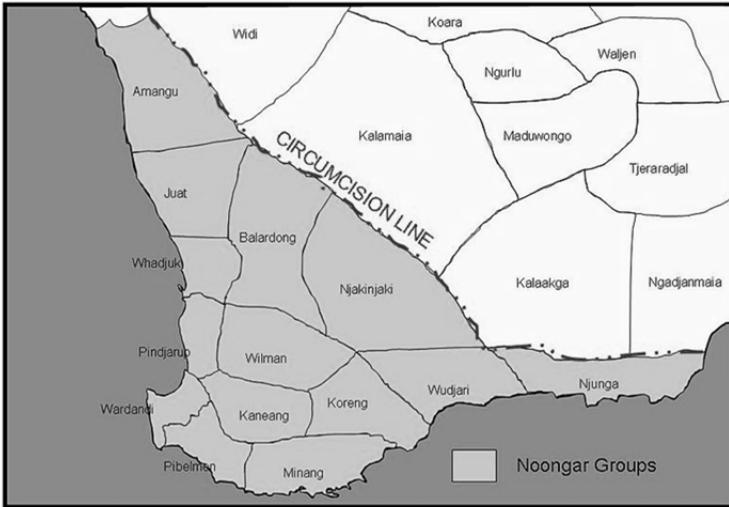


Figure 1. Nyoongar groups of South West Australia (Image from Wikipedia)

This paper is structured around six themes. The first offers a background to the project and our interpretation of participatory action research in an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) context. The second theme provides an overview of the impact of colonisation on Nyoongar people. Third, is an account of what it means to be Nyoongar. Fourth, provides a discussion of the methodology for the project. The fifth theme will outline the research process for the project and the critical roles of advocacy and activism taken on by the project team in working with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people. Sixth, and finally, because we propose that research should make a difference, we have provided examples of our work that we believe will assist researchers in ensuring their research practice is both respectful and responsive when working with Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people.

## **Similarities among differences: Decolonising the research space**

Aboriginal people have legitimate reasons for questioning both the motives and practices of researchers (Rigney 1997, 2001, Moreton-Robinson 2000, Tuhiwai-Smith 2003, Foley 2003, Dudgeon 2008, Tuck 2009, Alfred 2009). The Maori academic Linda Tuhiwai-Smith reminds us that 'scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism [and therefore] remains a powerful remembered history for many of the colonized peoples' (2003, p. 1). Researchers need to accept some responsibility for this situation due to their negligence in perpetuating past colonialist practices, for example, by not ensuring participants have shared in all the benefits of research (Humphery 2001). Despite the gains, the activity of research still privileges the researcher, rather than the participants (Humphery 2001, Pyett, 2002, Schnarch 2004, Madison 2005, Tuck 2009).

For the above reasons we earnestly believe it is important for us, as researchers, that we are both discerning in our ethical processes and in the selection and negotiation of appropriate research methodologies for conducting our research with the Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community. We feel it is very important that we ask ourselves the following questions: how safe can we make the research space for Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people? In particular, as researchers, how can we work to decolonise the space so as to allow Aboriginal (Nyoongar) people to be more empowered in the research process?

Our project uses participatory action research principles within an 'Indigenous research framework' (Chino and DeBryne 2006, Tuck 2009, Wallerstein and Duran 2010, Wright 2011, Fredericks et al 2011). Using a participatory action research framework for the project necessitates an intimate and close working relationship with the Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community throughout all stages of the project. We have incorporated within the participatory

action research structure an Aboriginal (Nyoongar) worldview and knowledge framework.

Our experience of working within an Indigenous research context has been different from working within a non-Indigenous context. As one of the authors of this paper, Wright states that Indigenous research has a dual focus: 'the first is to incorporate Indigenous knowledge in the research process and second to use research so as to mitigate the damaging effects of colonisation' (2011, p. 23). Colonisation has seriously impacted upon Indigenous people (Scharch 2004, Duran and Walters 2004, Duran et al 2007, Dudgeon 2008, Host and Owen 2009, Alfred 2009, Sherwood 2009, Wright 2011). As stated by Alfred:

Indigenous people don't experience colonialism as theories or as analytic categories. Colonialism is made real in the lives of First Nations people when these things go from being a set of imposed externalities to becoming causes of harm to them as people and as communities, limitations placed on their freedom, and disturbing mentalities, psychologies, and behaviours (2009, p. 43).

Most research conducted in the past was underpinned by colonialist principles and research practices that were conducted *on* people rather than *with* people (Rigney 1997, 2001, Moreton-Robinson 2000, Tuhiwai-Smith 2003, 2005, Foley 2003, Dudgeon 2008, Tuck 2009, Alfred 2009, Wright 2011). Colonisation in Australia has had serious implications for, as Sherwood states, 'Australia's colonial history sets the scene for problematic constructions of Indigenous people' (2009, p. 25). Given the oppressive nature of colonisation, we believe any research conducted with Indigenous people needs to focus on interventions 'that dismantle oppressive systems and empower participants to seek and demand change' (Wright, 2011, p. 36).

## **Adaptation or capitulation: Impact of colonisation on Nyoongar people**

Since the 1820s when the first settlements in Albany and the Swan River were established in Nyoongar country, the impact of colonisation has shifted the standpoint of Nyoongar law and customs (Host and Owen 2009). Falsehoods have been perpetuated and myths circulated by pseudo academics, like Daisy Bates and others, who declared in the early 1900s, that Nyoongar law and culture was dying, and on the point of extinction (Host and Owen 2009). It is now evident that Nyoongar law and customs are not dying or becoming extinct, rather they adapted to and continue to adapt to ongoing changing situations (Host and Owen 2009). Indeed, the perpetuation of the myths and falsehoods of a dying race were underpinned by colonialist principles and views of 'terra nullius' or empty place. Popularising the false notion that Nyoongar law and culture was extinguished provided the moral justification that Nyoongar people are incapable of surviving the forces of modernity. The notion of a dying culture has been relentless and, in part, effective. Effective for until very recently, Nyoongar law and culture has not been recognised or acknowledged as having its own distinctive identity by mainstream groups. Nyoongar law and culture has been conveniently diffused and integrated, and is now only recognised as part of the totality of Australian Aboriginal culture. But, as Host and Owen comment, this has been primarily a work of fiction:

Noongars survived as a people by holding on to what they could: their traditions, their principles and each other. Nor have they ever ceded their rights and interests in the land beneath their feet. On my reading of the historical record, I find that connection to land and kin, together with the custom of sharing resources and knowledge, were the matrix of traditional Noongar law custom. Some of the traditional symbols of Noongar culture remain, some have been modified and some have disappeared (2009, pp. 236-37).

Despite the legal recognition of Native Title being granted to the Wadjuk people over parts of the Perth metropolitan area in 2006 (Host and Owen 2009), there is still largely a general lack of acceptance of Nyoongar law and culture by mainstream groups. According to Host and Owen, there is much evidence that Nyoongar traditions have persisted in the face of colonisation, by way of the 'visible aspects of traditional law and culture' ...and 'the underlying structures [of] language, kinship networks, mutual obligation, sharing, and the care of women and children' (2009, p. 132). Yet there is still great reluctance to recognise the existence of Nyoongar law and culture in contemporary society.

Most Western Australians still believe the falsehoods promulgated by some academics and pseudo academics, often assisted by the media (Host and Owen 2009). These self-proclaimed experts continue to portray the myth that Nyoongar people relinquished their law and culture by fully embracing Western culture. However, this is wrong for there was no evidence of capitulation by Nyoongar people. Instead, as Host and Owen (2009) suggest, a rather more sophisticated form of adaptation occurred.

From the very first point of contact with the colonialists Nyoongar adaptation and cultural exchange began to take place, and as Host and Owen state, 'adaptation and cultural exchange are not cultural decline' (2009, p. 132). Adaptation occurred through Nyoongar people working on the country where they still maintained traditional ties:

As properties became established and full-time workers were no longer required, there evolved a contract system that was agreeable to Aboriginal people for several reasons. The work paid better and it generated a cycle of jobs on family 'runs' that coincided more or less with traditional territories. It also allowed time for hunting, camping and other aspects of traditional life, notably seasonal gathering at major centres like Katanning, which stood at the junction of three tribal areas, and Moora (Host and Owen 2009, p. 32).

This sophisticated form of Nyoongar adaptation and cultural exchange was, we believe, purposely enacted. Nyoongar culture survived the worst of colonisation. Indeed, there is evidence of a form of 'cultural continuity'. 'Cultural continuity' is a concept proposed by Chandler and Lalonde (1998), which they developed from their study of suicide with First Nation communities in Canada. They identified that the ongoing presence of a strong and vibrant culture provided a protective factor against the impact of colonisation.

Nevertheless we still have a situation in Western Australia where mainstream society barely recognises the existence of a distinctive and unique Nyoongar law and culture. One could argue that this was always the intention of those early architects of colonisation in Western Australia as their fundamental goal at all times was to extinguish Nyoongar culture. However, the original colonisers did not recognise, nor take into consideration, the resilience and strength of Nyoongar people. Consequently, Nyoongar culture and law remains vibrant and strong today (Host and Owen 2009, Haebich 2000, 1988, Clendinnen 2003, 1999).

## **Being Nyoongar: Nyoongar law and customs**

In September 2006, Justice Wilcox granted Native Title to the Wadjuk Nyoongar people over parts of the Perth metropolitan area and some surrounding non-urban areas. The decision by Justice Wilcox was overturned on appeal from the Commonwealth and Western Australian governments in 2008.

In the initial judgment Justice Wilcox recognised the evidence provided by the thirty Nyoongar witnesses indicating that 'their identity as a Noongar person was 'critically important' to the issue of continuity of a single Noongar society' (2006, p. 11). Justice Wilcox went on to say that he was impressed:

By the extent to which witnesses were able to trace their line of descent back for many generations and identify their contemporary relatives, despite the paucity of written

records, and to the extent they were able to speak about Aboriginal customs, beliefs and codes of conduct (2006, p. 12).

Until the decision by Justice Wilcox was overturned on appeal, it was the only Native Title Decision granted by the courts to Aboriginal people living in an urban region in Australia. The magnitude of this decision should not be underestimated; it was a defining moment for Nyoongar people as it signified public acknowledgement by the legal establishment that Nyoongar people continue to have a living culture. One hopes that the decision by Justice Wilcox to grant Native Title to Wadjuk Nyoongar people, despite the appeal, will now disprove the myths and falsehoods that Nyoongar people today have no living culture.

During the community forum phase of the project we heard many accounts by Nyoongar people speaking with a passion about their culture. It was abundantly evident that Nyoongar culture is still vibrant and very much alive. As one of the Nyoongar participants so eloquently described:

It is like an elastic band that connects to our grass roots family and community...and regardless how we function out there in the dominant culture, we all, when we get up and get dressed and we're about to put our hand on the handle of the front door to open it, we all take a deep breath before we go out there (December 2011).

Being Nyoongar is unique for as a people they have a strong spiritual connection to the land, as Justice Wilcox noted, 'a rich and active spiritual universe' (2006, p. 12). The spiritual healing that comes from the land and the wider environment is illustrated in an account provided by a Nyoongar participant at one of our community steering group meetings:

I was thinking, Nyoongar way, all the elements. Like, you have the weather, the breeze hits your face. The water is another cleansing thing - healing thing - and then you've got the colours: colours are good... every time we see a rainbow it brings us good healing, you know? (April 2012).

Nyoongar people have a different worldview, and since 1829 there has been ongoing adaptation and cultural exchange. Nyoongar people have adopted and adapted Western ideas to fit a Nyoongar worldview. They have adapted certain aspects of the dominant Western value system to fit Nyoongar law and cultural practices.

Obviously there have been changes for Nyoongar people, as Host and Owen assert: 'The genetic make-up of Noongars has changed as has that of peoples around the world, but this is of no consequence to Noongars who still identify, as they have always identified, in cultural terms' (2009, p. 226). Regardless, Nyoongar laws and customs are still very much alive and intact, as Host and Owen state 'Kinship bonds, custodial responsibilities, principles and protocols are enforced as rigidly as they were in the past' (2009, p. 226). Culture is a dynamic process, and Nyoongar law and culture is continually adapting to suit constantly changing situations.

## **Working Together: Project methodology**

The journey of 'Working Together' on the research process has had its fair share of highs and lows. The journey of participatory action research is often not without its hurdles (Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki 1994, Wallerstein 1999, Wallerstein and Duran 2010, Wright 2011, Land 2011) and working with Aboriginal people presents challenges to think and act in different ways (Manson et al 2004, Land 2011 and Wright 2011). It requires sensitivity and persistence, stamina, and a reflective posture that allows for an inner quietness to emerge. This inner quietness is important in the research process so one can be attentive to the rhythms of the community (Schnarch 2004, Wright 2011, Fredericks et al 2011). Skills like inner quietness are not always written or referred to in 'how-to-do research' textbooks and are not likely to be taught in universities as part of a research syllabus, but in our view this ability is most important and necessary when working with Aboriginal people. Nyoongar people have learned and acquired the qualities of an inner

quietness to enable them to be attentive to the rhythms of their community.

In the beginning we focused our activities on consulting with and informing the community about all aspects of the project. We were particularly mindful that trust and relationships are essential characteristics of this type of research. Lennie also sees such relationship building as vital in the early stages of a project to achieving 'high-quality outcomes and more trustworthy and richer data as well as leading to better feedback concerning the analysis and interpretation of evaluation data' (2006, p. 31). From our previous experiences we knew the importance of inviting participants to be involved in the design of the study (Wright 2011).

We commenced these initial consultations by asking the community how we should conduct the project. The decision to locate the project in the south-east metropolitan region of Perth was made after consulting with the community and representatives from the sector. After having met regularly with the project team over a number of months, local Aboriginal community organisations also agreed to host and promote community forums for the project. This consultation process built the foundation of trust for a long-term relationship that we have been able to sustain for the past three years of the project.

Building trust and holding long-term relationships are crucial to any change process. Lennie agrees that 'undertaking effective stakeholder analysis and using community participation, communication and engagement methods that develop relations of mutual trust and open communication' ensures high-quality outcomes will be achieved (2006, p. 34). Due to these early consultations, we had absolute endorsement for both the project and the selected geographical region from the full contingent of local service providers and Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community members.

During this phase of the project we established a *Project Reference Group*. The involvement of the *Project Reference Group* was critical as its members were able to closely monitor aspects of the project and were involved in the study design, selection of service sites and provided advice in the ethics process. Through their continual assessment and evaluation of critical aspects of the project, the members of the Group ensured that we worked with integrity.

Given that the majority of participants in the project were Nyoongar and with the project leader also being Nyoongar, we were mindful of not blurring the boundaries due to 'insider' knowledge of the community (Dickson-Swift et al 2006). For this reason we engaged both a Nyoongar Elder and a Nyoongar consultant to provide cultural advice for the project. The involvement of both the Nyoongar Elder and consultant provided a more objective check on the cultural appropriateness of the research process and ensured that the project did not blur any cultural boundaries.

Our methodology for the project included conducting 11 community forums during 2011 over an approximate period of 12 months. In our original proposal we were planning to bring the community and the mental health service providers together in early 2012 to work on designing an evaluation framework. While conducting the community forums during 2011 we learned that the local Aboriginal (Nyoongar) community was distrustful of the mental health system. We heard from the community that they were experiencing a high number of suicides; and that they were frustrated and angry at both the inaccessibility of services and the lack of support provided by mental health service providers. The community was, and rightly so, outraged and very focused on changing the way the system operates. They were forthright in their views and told us that they felt isolated and abandoned by the mental health service providers in the region.

A major strength of using participatory action research is its flexibility. We are continually realigning the methodology to fit the rhythms and changes within the community. Participatory action

research with Indigenous people needs to recognise relationships and trust, as Chino and DeBruyn state:

It must establish a participatory process where mutual learning is taking place without the potential for abuses and exploitation and repair lines of trust between non-indigenous researchers and tribal communities (2006, p. 597).

Acting in accordance with the underlying participatory action research principle of, *a commitment to work in partnership with participants in addressing community concerns*, meant that we could and should adjust our methodology to fit community expectations and aspirations. Needless to say, the findings from the community forums prompted us to adopt a change in methodology.

Being too rigid with the methodology would have created difficulties both for the participants and for us, the researchers. Our methodology provided flexibility to adapt to the needs of the community. Given the degree of distrust held by the Nyoongar community and their lack of motivation for engagement with the mental health system, we changed our focus and concentrated our efforts for a further six months, working with a smaller cohort of Nyoongar people living in the area.

From January to July 2012 we conducted a further 10 community meetings with the smaller cohort for the purpose of designing a culturally secure framework for mental health service delivery. Over the six months and ten meetings, the group worked intensively on the design of a framework. Most of the group participants had attended at least one of the community forums. Even though the change in methodology was not part of the original plan, the opportunity to work with the community for an additional period of time, with the focus on collaboratively designing a culturally secure framework, was fortuitous, as we believe it significantly improved both the process and the final result.

A Nyoongar consultant was engaged and, together with an Educational Designer, they facilitated the community meetings. At the opening gathering, the Nyoongar facilitator welcomed each member of the group to the process and congratulated them on being co-researchers on the project; their commitment to the process was absolute. The Educational Designer set up an online interactive webpage so that group members could view and comment on both the process and the emerging framework. We, the project team, remained vigilant in ensuring that the process was both transparent and inclusive. We believed we achieved our aims as we had a core group of six to eight participants attend each of the ten sessions.

We were very surprised at the results. Like others, we have become distracted by what we call the mainstream ‘noise’ in the use of the term ‘cultural appropriateness’. The original intent of cultural appropriateness was both honourable and well meaning, however, over time the term has become blurred and in some instances meaningless. We agree that there is a need to create spaces that are culturally safe for Indigenous people. However, it is our view, that there is currently much confusion around the definition of ‘culturally appropriateness’; especially in the context of Nyoongar people. In our opinion, the term cultural appropriateness has been devalued and distorted by mainstream groups. From our findings, we believe we have identified what constitutes cultural safety for Nyoongar people, which might also have relevance for other Indigenous Australians.

We have therefore dispensed with the phrase ‘culturally appropriate’, believing it to be irrelevant as it does not adequately acknowledge Nyoongar law and culture, the very foundations from which a sense of cultural safety should grow. Our findings revealed that the Nyoongar community would rather mental health services be delivered in a way that demonstrates a comprehensive understanding and respect for a Nyoongar worldview. From these findings we have developed a Nyoongar research framework that is based on a Nyoongar worldview.

## **Representations and responsibilities: Research process**

In our experience, trust and reciprocity are essential elements in any research process that has an inclusive agenda (Dudgeon 2008, Wright 2011). Our research process has been designed to acknowledge Nyoongar culture. Indeed, as one of the participants told us, 'our research methodology based on Nyoongar knowledge and cultural belief is about decolonising the research space'. This means that our methodology is firstly about recognising and celebrating Nyoongar culture, and secondly it is about empowering Nyoongar people. We have collaborated with Nyoongar Elders and community members in this process and they have told us of the importance of decolonising the research space.

As stated previously, the research project is located in Nyoongar country. Our project is in the Perth metropolitan region in an area known as Wadjuk boodja. Wadjuk boodja extends along the Swan River south to Fremantle, east to Armadale and north to Upper Swan. The majority of Aboriginal people living in the region where the research is being conducted are Nyoongar people. One key aspect of Nyoongar life is the six Nyoongar seasons and these are central to Nyoongar people's ontological understanding of their cosmology. The stories that underpin a Nyoongar worldview of the changing seasons mix and weave place, animals and people within its narrative. The Nyoongar community have agreed for the Nyoongar six seasons to be integrated into the research process.

Our research project has focused on the aspirations of the Nyoongar community, for, as Schnarch states, 'in an Aboriginal context, community relevance and community usefulness may be the most telling measures of the worth of a study' (2004, p. 89). In applying the principles of participatory action research, we have incorporated the principles of a Nyoongar research framework as an integral part of our methodology.

The structure for the Nyoongar research framework is still in its developmental phase. Along with the Nyoongar six seasons, the framework is supported by the four principles outlined by Chino and DeBryne (2006) in their model for working with First Nation people. These act as building blocks for change by respecting and celebrating Nyoongar ways of being, knowing and doing. The Nyoongar research framework is being developed with the intention of decolonising spaces, so that they become more inclusive and empowering spaces for Nyoongar people. They are the ethical foundations on which to 'do business' with Nyoongar people, in regards to changing mental health service provision in the south-east Perth metropolitan corridor.

These foundational principles are:

1. **Creating relationships:** Holding and sustaining relationships are critical in any change process. Importantly, Nyoongar people must be acknowledged, valued and respected and their views and opinions must be acted upon.
2. **Securing trust:** By seeing the uniqueness of others and recognising your own uniqueness allows acceptance to emerge. Service providers have seriously compromised the trust of Nyoongar people. Therefore, service providers must show mature leadership and demonstrate positive change, and be prepared for the community to judge their efforts in order to gain trust from the community.
3. **Working together:** Working together demands humility. Humility misses nothing and takes even the smallest of things seriously, for inside little things there is immensity. Therefore, service providers must be honest in their interactions with the Nyoongar community. Service providers must accept and show genuine humility in their commitment to developing and sustaining genuine relationships with Nyoongar people.
4. **Sustaining commitment:** Engagement that requires behaviour change involves sustained commitment and

courage. Commitment requires maturity to sustain the circumstances of change. Courage is the strength and tenacity for holding the vision that change is possible. Service providers must show courage and maturity to make the vision a reality.

We view these building blocks as a process for change, a culturally safe way for Nyoongar people to work with service providers to re-engage, for they offer a lens for service providers to begin to understand a Nyoongar worldview. There is the need for creating a new and open communicative space that allows for critical discussions that will reshape and reconnect these mainstream systems so they become more relevant to Nyoongar people in their everyday life and, in the case of our project, their health and wellbeing. As Gayá Wicks and Reason state, 'communicative action in the lifeworld makes possible the formation, affirmation and regeneration of a community's value commitments and integrative influence, which are then manifested through systems' (2009, p. 246). In the next section we will discuss how we are working responsibly with the Nyoongar research framework to decolonise research practices and spaces.

## **Making a difference: Reflections on working responsibly**

The central tenet of the Nyoongar Framework is about decolonising spaces and practices. Colonialist practices have been the cause of much pain and trauma, as Duran and Walters state: 'the cumulative and intergenerational effects of historical traumas have been characterized as a "soul wound" among indigenous peoples' (2004, p. 194). This project is about healing the 'soul wound' through reconnection to and celebration of Nyoongar law and culture. There is now increasing evidence that links the experience of traumatic life events with poor mental health outcomes for Indigenous peoples (Walters and Simoni 2002, Duran and Walters 2004, Weaver and Yellow Horse Braveheart 2008, Yellow Horse Braveheart 2008, Zubrick et al 2005). Studies have

shown that there is a relationship between the ongoing impact of colonisation and mental health issues like, post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression and anxiety disorders (Whitbeck et al 2004, Weaver and Yellow Horse Braveheart 2008, Yellow Horse Braveheart 2008).

There have been significant challenges for this project, in particular, attending to the size and scope of the serious and complex mental health issues that are impacting on Aboriginal people. Mental health is a highly charged and emotive issue for the Nyoongar community involved in this study. Thus, our work is twofold. Firstly, we aim to identify and develop a pathway for change in the provision of mental health services founded on Nyoongar law and culture, which can provide a protective factor to hedge against the structures of colonisation. Secondly, we seek to ensure our research outcomes have wider application, for, as Wright states, '[r]esearch outcomes [should] necessarily have wider implications because they optimally contribute to the dismantling of the broader structures of colonisation' (2011, p. 23).

We have had the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the framework on several occasions, both formally and informally. The project team, including the co-researchers, planned the dissemination strategy for the release of a draft of the Nyoongar research framework. We have now given five presentations on the Nyoongar framework and on most, if not all, occasions it has been well received. In September 2012, the authors travelled to Sydney to present at the Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) annual Australasian conference. A week after the ALARA conference in Sydney, we were invited to facilitate a workshop in Perth on the Nyoongar research framework for Aboriginal participants engaged in participatory action research in a range of community projects around Australia. For the ALARA conference we applied the six Nyoongar seasons and the four ethical principles from the Nyoongar framework to investigate areas of organizational development that could change to better respond to the needs of Aboriginal clients. We used the Nyoongar

six seasons as a metaphor for undertaking this investigation, providing participants with a framework for seeing organizational development through a Nyoongar 'lens' that highlights the influences of seasonal and cyclical characteristics. For the Aboriginal participants from around Australia, we changed the focus of the Nyoongar Framework to explore research practices, using the six Nyoongar seasons as a metaphor for mapping out the research journey that incorporates a cycle of self-reflection and responds to the rhythms of the community. An obvious strength of the Nyoongar Framework is its versatility.

In offering some feedback on our ALARA conference workshop, participants greatly appreciated the telling of the Nyoongar story through a Nyoongar lens:

'I liked [the] metaphoric language. Cultural worldview was amazing [and I] enjoyed the thinking in this space.'

So too, a quote from one of the Aboriginal participants from the research workshop, on the 'Things I [they] really liked during the presentation/workshop', was equally as positive:

'The discussion around the six [Nyoongar] seasons and how they relate to the question of how we will engage with our communities.'

An important component of the framework is the visible presence of Nyoongar cultural leadership, a feature also echoed in the research team itself, namely through the presence of the Nyoongar lead researcher, Nyoongar Elder and Nyoongar consultant (that is Michael Wright, Margaret Culbong and Danny Ford, respectively).

In November 2012, we facilitated a one-day workshop with Nyoongar Elders and community members and mental health service providers. The aim of the workshop was to begin the process of identifying practices that will work toward decolonising these organisational spaces. Institutions, such as those in the health system, are representative of Australia's dark history of colonisation and marginalisation of Aboriginal people, as they perpetuate the exclusion of Aboriginal people and culture. In

particular, mental health professionals have an appalling history in terms of their interactions with Aboriginal people as the psychiatrist Dr Alan Rosen states:

If you were indigenous and diagnosed with a mental illness, you were often doubly colonised, once by European culture, and again by mental health professionals and our institutions, who took over vocational ownership of indigenous lives on the assumption that “we know what is best for you” (2012, p. 2).

The workshop created an opportunity for Nyoongar Elders and service providers to engage in a process of adaptation and cultural exchange as they identified the changes needed to improve the safety of these colonialist spaces. Using the Nyoongar framework as a foundation, participants at the workshop provided key aspects that will form the basis for the design of an evaluation framework that will be used to measure changes in service delivery for a number of selected organisations working with Nyoongar people. We again used the Nyoongar Framework as the working space to engage in the change process. This is important as it means working with the issues at some depth. Real change for Nyoongar people consists of decolonising the structures and systems that continue to traumatise and disempower. Mental health service providers also realize that whilst they are part of the problem, they are necessarily part of the solution. We believe that the Nyoongar Framework achieves this end. Workshop participants were positive about their experience of this collaboration:

‘I have learned more today about working with Nyoongar people than I have from 2 & 3 day workshops about working with Aboriginal people.’

‘Access to Elders and well informed presentation. It was great to be a part of this fantastic group of people.’

## **Summary: Working at the edge**

One of the project team members is a Nyoongar Elder and she has consistently told us that she and others in the community are

impatient for change. As an Elder she has seen too much unnecessary suffering experienced by Nyoongar people. She constantly reminds us that time is of the utmost importance and that she wants to see change for the better for Nyoongar people as soon as possible. We agree, and are grateful for both her presence and her vigilance in reminding us of the importance of this work. We are also reminded by the stories of the participants about the urgency of this work.

Our work is certainly about change. As a group, we are committed to initiating change within a system that has for far too long been allowed to operate in a dysfunctional manner. We are confident that changes are possible, and that the people working in these systems also want change to occur; they just do not know how to do it. We believe that once completed, the Nyoongar Framework will provide a pathway to guide the change process.

The aim of this paper was to present both a discussion on our research process and the ongoing development of a Nyoongar research framework. As the framework is still in development, we have decided not to provide any extensive details of the framework in this paper. Instead we chose to focus our discussion on the research process we applied in the development of the framework. Equally important, we were also unashamedly showcasing and celebrating both the survival and uniqueness of Nyoongar law and culture.

It is our view that research should be a transformative experience for all involved, and as we continue to present our findings to Nyoongar audiences we are both pleased by, and grateful for, their responses. As indicated in the paper, Nyoongar law and customs are neither recognised nor celebrated enough, by policy makers, academics, or the media. More often, Nyoongar people are pathologised, usually by the media, which indirectly debases Nyoongar law and culture. We have seen Nyoongar people transformed when we present the Nyoongar Framework; for us as researchers this is incredibly humbling and inspiring. We believe the Nyoongar Framework, once developed, will have wider

application, and if early signs are any indication, it will have a considerably positive effect on the Nyoongar community. We are very excited about the process thus far, but, as it is a participatory action research process, there will always be surprises; so we will, through our inner quietness, remain prepared for the unexpected.

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## Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contributions of the Nyoongar Elders with whom we have worked during the Looking Forward Project and thank them for their cultural guidance and leadership. We thank the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and the Centre for Research Excellence in Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing for their continued support for the Project. We also thank our Project partner, Ruah Community Services. The Looking Forward Project is funded by the NHMRC and Lottery West.

## About the Authors

**Dr Michael Wright** is a Yuat Nyoongar man. His family is from the Moora and New Norcia area of WA. He has worked as a hospital-based social worker and mental health manager. In 2010, Michael graduated with a PhD that investigated issues of access to services for Aboriginal families whose lives are affected by mental illness.

The “Looking Forward” project expands on the work completed for his PhD.

**Margaret Culbong** is a Nyoongar Elder from the Narrogin area of WA. She began her career as an enrolled nurse, working with Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley and the Murchison Gascoyne regions of WA. Over the past 40 years she has worked both within government agencies and Aboriginal organisations to develop health services that are relevant to the needs of Aboriginal families. She was responsible for establishing a number of Aboriginal-controlled health services and raising the profile of Aboriginal health issues throughout WA. Margaret continues to be an agent of change for her community across issues including housing, welfare, legal assistance and family support.

**Tanya Jones** is of Anglo-Australian descent and was born and raised in Perth. She has previously worked as a research assistant in the areas of child and adolescent health promotion and chronic disease self-management. Her educational background is in psychology.

**Margaret O’Connell** is of Anglo-Australian descent, and is an educational designer and action researcher who has worked in the education sector for over a decade. Margaret was born in Perth and raised in the south-west. She has a Master of Education and has experience in project management, strategic development, and training and professional development, particularly in online teaching and learning.

**Danny Ford** is a Nyoongar man with connections to Wadjuk, Ballardong and Yuat clans. He has tertiary qualifications in teaching and social work. Danny has worked in government for 29 years in the child protection and family support area as well as housing and training. Danny is well known and highly respected as a cultural consultant in the non-profit and government sectors. Most of Danny’s working life has focused on addressing disadvantage of Aboriginal people and the provision of appropriate services.

# Migrant sex workers and trafficking - insider research for and by migrant sex workers

Jules Kim and Elena Jeffreys

## Abstract

*Researching marginalised groups is challenging and fraught with ethical issues. These issues can be exacerbated when the researcher is an outsider. Migrant sex workers are a marginalised group due to their position as a sex worker and their migrant status. For outsiders undertaking research with these groups there is the potential for their personal beliefs and moral views around migration, sex work, race, gender and sexuality to influence research methodology, analysis, interpretation and outcomes. Often this has resulted in migrant sex workers being portrayed as victims in need of help, rather than as active, self-determining agents. Much of the research relating to migrant sex workers and trafficking has taken place in institutionalised settings. In such settings, there is good reason for migrant sex workers to identify as coerced victims in need of help rather than as willing migrants who have experienced bad workplace situations and/or who have engaged in alternate migration pathways. Research of this type is usually conducted in detention centres or refuges or worse still-citing difficulties in accessing this population, some researchers will only interview service providers and make conclusions without ever speaking to the target population the research makes claims about. Insiders can more readily gain full and uncompromised access to sex workers affected by trafficking policy outside of institutional settings. In this paper using an example from Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association, we argue for more insider research. We present our methods and discuss how insider led migrant sex work research can lead to*

*credible research outcomes and have many broader benefits for our community.*

**Keywords:** *Insider research, participatory research, sex workers, migrant sex workers, peer education, community development*

## **Introduction**

Ethical research is crucial but especially so when it comes to marginalised and stigmatised communities. Ethical issues include informed consent, confidentiality, access and also accurate representation. When the researched are migrant sex workers there is a tendency in the popular and academic literature, to portray migrant sex workers as victims without agency. This relates in part to the values and worldview of the researcher but also of the inability of outsiders to gain entry to marginalised populations and gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study. As such, outsider led research can result in finding and interpretations which lead to poor policy decisions and ultimately poor outcomes for the people the policy is designed to protect. In this paper we argue for and provide an example of the methods used in insider led research with migrant sex workers in Australia, and explore how such an approach can help resolve some of the ethical dilemmas present.

We organise our paper as follows. First we provide an overview of Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association and the peak body of sex workers and sex worker organisations in Australia. Next we discuss migrant sex workers in Australia and discuss how the linking of migrant sex workers and human trafficking in academia and the popular media, has often resulted in poor policy and fails to recognise migrant sex workers as self-determining agents. We argue this is because most of the research which has been undertaken has been by outsiders who as non-migrant sex workers fail to fully understand and accurately present migrant sex workers' views. Next we present our methods and discuss how this enhanced the quality of the research.

## **About Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association**

Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association, is the peak body of sex workers and sex worker organisations in Australia. Scarlet Alliance aims, through its objectives, policies and programs, to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for past and present workers in the sex industry; in order for sex workers to be self-determining agents, building their own alliances and choosing where and how they work. Formed in 1989, our membership includes State and Territory based sex worker organisations and projects throughout Australia, as well as individual sex workers, which ensures we are able to represent the issues affecting our members and sex workers Australia wide. To inform our work from an evidence base we have regular consultation and steering committee meetings with our membership, as well as with individual sex workers. Scarlet Alliance adopts an affirmative action policy in regards to our membership, leadership, staff and volunteers, that is, everyone involved in Scarlet Alliance is a sex worker. This is driven by the belief that sex workers are best placed and capable of leading and directing policy, research and services for sex workers. While there are skills in report writing or research that can be learnt, the marginalisation and experiences of being a sex worker can only be known by someone who has actually been a sex worker. Additionally, Scarlet Alliance has a policy of consultation and representation with and by members within sub-communities on specific issues, for example, male spokesperson on issues relating to male sex work.

The centrality of affected communities has supported effective community engagement, policy development and implementation and is acknowledged as critical to the success of Australia's successful HIV response (DOHA, 2010, p. 3). Recognising the importance of sex worker peer education to this response, the Australian Government began resourcing peer educators and sex worker organisations. More recently, sex workers have also been

employed as peer educators by Scarlet Alliance as part of the 'whole of government' response to trafficking in persons. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing recognises multi lingual peer outreach as especially important due to additional considerations presented by groups with intersecting marginalities and specific needs, such as language, visas and effects of criminalisation (DOHA, 2010, p. 27). Skilled peer educators are in high demand within the existing sex worker organisational infrastructures and there are challenges to maintaining these human resources, including the under resourcing of sex worker organisations and the high turnover of staff (Department of Health and Ageing, 2005, p. 19).

## **Migrant sex workers**

Migrant sex workers in Australia have played an important role in informing, leading, and producing knowledge within the context of the contemporary international sex worker rights movement, the birth of which can be traced to the 1975 protests in Lyon, France. More recently anti-trafficking interventions have had a largely negative impact on sex work in general but on migrant sex workers in particular (Augustin, 2009; Pearson, 2007; Weitzer, 2007). Currently anti-trafficking interventions both in Australia and abroad have been based on criminal justice approaches with a firm focus on the sex industry. There is a widely recognised dearth of evidence based research in the area and claims of the difficulty in researching trafficking particularly within the sex industry has led to a gross overestimation on the size and nature of trafficking in the sex industry (Feingold, 2010; Jordan, 2011; Weitzer 2012). The stereotype that exploitation and the sex industry are inherently linked and therefore migration for sex work equals trafficking is a widespread one that is often recycled in the media. This has contributed to poor public policy based on limited evidence.

The premise behind this policy approach is that sex workers do not have agency and migrant sex workers in particular, are victims

and incapable of making a choice to engage in sex work. In this worldview, sex work is not seen as work but as a crime. From this perspective, trafficking and sex work are seen as inextricably interrelated phenomena. They are interlinked in academic thought and research about trafficking (Campani 1999), a link which many academics have attributed to US policies and abolitionist lobbying groups (Ditmore and Wijers 2003; Doezema 2004; Weitzer 2005, 2007 cited in Saunders 2005; Papanicolaou 2008). This has resulted in much trafficking research blending the two phenomena, making broad theoretical statements without identifying what parts of their research relate to crime (trafficking) and what parts relate to work (sex work). This failure to separate sex work from trafficking is used to support general assertions about the harms of sex work and size and extent of trafficking. For example, the numbers of migrant sex workers in Australia has been used as the number of trafficking victims in Australia. This results in inaccurate and inflated numbers, which in turn are picked up and sensationalised in the media building on the public perception that these are fact. Even when proven to be inaccurate, the truth is forgotten and the inflated numbers remain in the public consciousness. For example, long after the “1000 sex slaves in Australia every year” research was discredited, that number continues to be reproduced (Project Respect, 2004). This faulty perception has driven public pressure on politicians to act. In 2003 the trafficking media landscape of the time was dominated by the work of Wynhausen in *The Australian*, who asserted a death in custody in Villawood was that of a Thai woman who had been sold as a sex slave at age 12 (Wynhausen and O'Brien 2003). This assertion was factually incorrect and was corrected within months by Jim Pollard for *The Daily Telegraph* who travelled to Chiang Mai (Pollard 2003) to investigate. Regardless of the inaccuracies the story captured the imagination of anti-sex work campaigners in Australia and led to irrevocable change to the Australian approach to anti-trafficking. O'Brien summarises:

The articles commenced in March 2003, and by April politicians were acting on the issue. In their article, ‘Sex slave industry “shames” Canberra’ the authors indicate that

the Federal Opposition had been encouraged by their articles to push the government for action (The Australian 3 April 2003, 6). The following day The Australian heralded the Federal Government's announcement of a review into the prevention of sex trafficking (The Australian 4 April 2003, 6). By the next week, a report in The Australian credited the Wynhausen and O'Brien articles with sparking the review, declaring that, 'their revelations provoked a political flurry' (The Australian 12 April 2003). The 2003 Inquiry demonstrates the influence of a narrative focusing solely on sexual exploitation. (O'Brien 2010)

The nature of the arguments that led to these developments are defined by Ronald Weitzer as a 'crusader' approach and O'Brien groups the arguments into seven areas:

1. Sex work is bad/exploitative,
2. Violence occurs in sex work and in trafficking,
3. Sex workers' customers and traffickers are bad/exploitative (a premise debunked in the Thai-Lao border work by Molland 2010),
4. Sex workers do not have agency,
5. Sex work and trafficking are inextricably linked (An important claim of the crusader trafficking lobbying in Australia, according to O'Brien 2010),
6. The size of sex work and trafficking is high and has recently increased and
7. Law reform to legalise/decriminalise sex work would increase the prevalence of sex work and trafficking.

The assumptions of these claims lead to arguments and proposals to abolish sex work. The Attorney General's office tabled the Criminal Code Amendment (Trafficking in Persons) Bill in Parliament in late 2004, which was sent to a Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee of the Senate in February 2005. The Committee made recommendations to amend the

legislation which was then successfully reintroduced to the senate on the 21<sup>st</sup> June, 2005. These approaches have increased harassment and risk to migrant sex workers. These approaches to trafficking include unnecessarily frequent compliance activity on Asian sex industry establishments and on Asian sex workers in particular. The harassment and detention of Asian sex workers in the guise of anti-trafficking has driven migrant sex workers underground, marginalising them further and creating barriers to accessing justice, outreach, peer education, industrial rights and occupational health and safety and increased risks to migrant sex workers.

Reliable research outcomes are vital as they inform and shape government policy and are central for ongoing improvement of service delivery and improved health and human rights of the community. From the outset the value and reliability of research outcomes can be influenced by the kinds of definitions used by the research team. Researcher's negative views on sex work and migration can sway the outcome of the research, even prior to its commencement. The influence of trafficking policy on migrant sex workers has further muddied the waters with the conflation of migration by sex workers with trafficking. These policies undermine laws that are beneficial to sex workers, such as the decriminalisation of sex work (Pearson, 2000, p. 57). Research needs to represent people's actual experiences without outsiders' moral judgments or personal agendas affecting the outcomes. While it might be argued that research regardless of who conducts it is a subjective process, a critical understanding of a community's experience and reality can be achieved through the active involvement of members of the community in all phases of the action research process. Many research projects use migrant sex workers to further their claims and anti sex work and anti migration agendas (Weitzer, 2007), often with questionable methodology and minimal or no ethics approval process.

Reliable research can be achieved through active participation at all stages by the community that is the subject of the research,

coupled with clear processes, informed consent, ethically sound methodology, clarity on definitions and sources. Few research projects however have specifically engaged migrant sex workers through each stage of the research process. Nevertheless there are a few examples.

Trafficking knowledge specifically has been produced through activities including projects (such as the SIREN project 1994), research (such as that produced by Sydney Sexual Health Centre in 1993 and 2003), submissions (such as those produced by Scarlet Alliance 2003 and 2004), advocacy (such as the Thai Sex Worker Senate delegation on the process of public participation, 2002), protests (such as that held in Thailand at the opening of the XV International AIDS Congress in Bangkok 2004).

The present study is the newest instalment of knowledge produced by migrant sex workers in Australia. Within this current research, migrant sex workers are positioned as the subject of trafficking knowledge; knowledge that is a source of empowerment, protection and sustainability. These sex worker led research projects present a counter narrative on trafficking and migrant sex work. The counter narrative democratises knowledge- it is controlled and created by migrant sex workers not on and about migrant sex workers. Research for and by the community not only advances knowledge in the field but also increases capacity within the community. This process of research that increases knowledge and community development is critical to the principles of action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). When research is undertaken by a community member, the tensions that exist between the researcher and participants are alleviated by the united aims of both researcher and participants. In the present research, it was an agreed aim that the value of the Alliance research would be in the representation of the actual voices and reality for migrant sex workers as perceived by migrant sex workers- not the perception of our reality by outsiders. By increasing the knowledge in the field the research aimed to increase evidence base about migrant sex workers. In addition to

the lessons from similar research undertaken in 2006/07, these were the considerations and environment that affected and drove the need for our latest research project.

### **Participatory and iterative development of the research**

The process of engaging with, involving and developing the research strategy as a participatory and iterative process was simultaneously action research and capacity building. The development of the research strategy is outlined below.

In 2009/10 Scarlet Alliance conducted a migrant sex work research project, building upon a survey instrument and methodology that had been used successfully by the organisation in 2006/7 in partnership with Zi Teng, a sex worker organisation in Hong Kong (Scarlet Alliance, 2008). The research presented in this paper aimed to find similarities and differences between migrant and non-migrant sex workers experiences in Australia and address an identified evidence gap. As the peak national body of sex worker organisations in Australia, Scarlet Alliance was able to draw on knowledge from our membership as well as incorporating improvements based upon the learning from the previous research. The initial survey instrument was developed in 2005 by Zi Teng and has been used to assess the working conditions and demographic of Chinese language background sex workers in seven countries. The first collection in Australia occurred in 2006/07. For survey results see Scarlet Alliance (2008) and Elena Jeffreys and Roberta Perkins (2011).

The 2010 survey expanded upon the 2006/07 survey, in content, languages and reach. In 2006/7 there were less questions than the later survey, it was run only in Simplified Chinese and English, and less than 100 sex workers participated (n=43 Chinese language background and n=29 English language background). The 2010 methodology was established through discussion and agreement between Scarlet Alliance and the funder, Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). Early contractual negotiations included agreement that the 2010 survey instrument would be an updated

and expanded version of the Zi Teng survey, it would be run in four languages and target over 100 sex workers. By incorporating the lessons from the earlier research and the implementation of sex worker led research approaches the project collected over 600 surveys, 594 were deemed complete enough for analysis. 75% of these were classified as migrant. This is the largest research of migrant sex workers in Australia to date.

The survey in 2006/07 gave condoms as a gift to sex workers who chose to participate in the survey; and planned to do so again in 2010. The AIC originally had concerns about the use of work related gifts. This feedback was brought to the Steering Committee who affirmed that condoms were a preferred gift; after a briefing from Scarlet Alliance, the AIC supported the proposal to distribute work related gifts.

After commencing collection it was found that in certain states condoms were widely distributed for free; their value as a workplace gift therefore was diminished. It was determined acceptable to give other gifts of equal value. Other gifts included the book "Call Girls" by Roberta Perkins and Frances Lovejoy (UNSW Press) based upon a decade of research projects similar to this one. International phone cards and boxes of chocolates complemented the array of gifts of equal monetary value available to participants to choose depending on availability.

The first detailed discussions about the 2010 survey instrument were hosted by Scarlet Alliance in Surry Hills, New South Wales, Australia, in December 2009. In attendance were Scarlet Alliance Migration Project Staff (who are themselves migrant sex workers), Scarlet Alliance leadership, Steering Committee Members (Chinese, Korean and Thai speaking background sex workers) including some of the Chinese speaking background 2006/7 survey collectors and participants, representatives from future potential project partners (i.e. sex worker member organisations of Scarlet Alliance who had the capacity to undertake collection for the research project), Scarlet Alliance members with a social research background, and project staff from the AIC.

At this meeting the survey was discussed in detail, question by question. This included the layout of certain questions, the order of questions, response types (multiple responses vs single responses, qualitative vs quantitative), determining which questions would be optional, cultural issues and potential translation problems. Language sub-groups had time to discuss the wording of questions, to ensure the survey could be successfully translated simply from English into three other languages. Experiences of both collection and data analysis from the first round of the questionnaire in Australia were taken into account.

Scarlet Alliance drew on outreach data from sex worker organisations in Australia to determine which languages to use for the survey. Sex worker organisations regularly conduct peer education to sex worker workplaces. During these visits peer educators routinely collect data on their observations, utilising action learning to ensure appropriate services are being tailored to needs of the community. Sex worker organisations around Australia have consistently reported to Scarlet Alliance that they were outreaching sex workers from non-English speaking backgrounds who spoke Mandarin, Cantonese, Thai and Korean. Due to financial limitations and the high cost of translation, the survey was only produced in what was identified as the four most commonly used languages. Researchers were also actively sought from those language backgrounds. Choosing these three particular languages (Simplified Chinese, Korean and Thai) in addition to English (to enable comparison data) allowed for the widest number of non-English speaking background sex workers to participate, in all levels of the project.

Time and resources affected the decisions that were also made about the sex and gender focus of the research. Outreach data from our member organisations affirms that male sex workers make up approximately 5-10% of sex workers in Australia. Male sex workers are under-represented in sex worker community structures such as peer education and sex worker organisations and there are only a small number of sex industry businesses in

Australia that employ male sex workers. There was no targeted recruitment to encourage male researchers, and as a result the collection did not target male workers specifically, resulting in sex workers who identify as male being underrepresented in the survey.

There were a small number of trans\* collectors who were trained during the project.

Recently shifting terminology meant that while use of the term “transgender” to identify sex and/or gender diversity had been current for the sex worker community in the 2006/07 survey, by 2010 this terminology had become outdated. Scarlet Alliance updated the use of the term “transgender” to the more inclusive “trans\*” in late 2010; too late to impact upon the survey questions.

Many trans\* individuals identify themselves as “male” or “female” rather than “trans\*” and may have self-selected as “male” or “female”. Within the sample there are a small number of sex workers who identified themselves as “transgender”, and a smaller number again who chose not to identify themselves by the gender options provided. Overall this has resulted in the majority of respondents reflecting the gender and language background of the researchers (see table 1 and 2). This does not in any way reflect the nature of the sex industry, rather it is a direct reflection of the researchers and methodology employed by the project.

Table 1: Gender

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Female</b>	568	95.8
<b>Male</b>	17	2.9
<b>Transgender</b>	8	1.4
<b>Total</b>	593 <sup>a</sup>	100.0 <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> 1 missing response; <sup>b</sup> may not accurately sum to 100 due to rounding

Table 2: Language that respondent self selected to complete the survey

Language group	Frequency	Percentage
Thai	136	22.9
Simplified Chinese	85	14.3
Korean	41	6.9
English	298	50.2
Other/unknown	34	5.7
<b>Total</b>	594	100 <sup>a</sup>

*a* may not accurately sum to 100 due to rounding

The project became a networking, volunteer and action learning space that introduced sex workers of Thai, Chinese and Korean language background to colleagues and opportunities for increased involvement in the formal organisations of the sex worker movement. Three bilingual peer researchers went on to become formally employed as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) peer educators at sex worker organisations. Peer researchers, survey participants and sex workers encountered during the research process were all exposed to Scarlet Alliance and the opportunity to become part of the Steering Committee which guides the work of the Migration Project. Like all the work at Scarlet Alliance, the project has many formal and informal, external and internal forms of evaluation which guides future action, improvements to approaches and ensures we maintain our relevance for our community.

## Critical anti-racist and feminist approaches to methodology

Sex workers were involved in every level of the research project, from its inception and negotiation to its dissemination and management, right through to its analysis and reporting. This imparted various benefits to the project that were readily apparent.

- Holistic perspective – the ability to account for a range of aspects and nuances within the sex worker community in the research via involvement of sex workers in every facet of the project.
- Unparalleled access – both to workers and workplaces, particularly to CALD sex workers and to workplaces outside the licensed brothel sector.
- Understanding of issues – often anticipation and effective solutions to potential issues were posited before they arose protecting against confounding variables arising throughout the research.
- Expediency and efficiency – being pre aware of the issues and intricacies of sex worker communities and sex work workplaces saved considerable time and resources. The ability to draw on existing networks and relationships further contributed to this.
- Trust within the community – Trust that exists by virtue of relationships built over many years and the camaraderie of peers with analogous experiences. It would have otherwise taken a considerable amount of time to have built this level of trust.
- Integrity of responses – trust amongst peers and of the motivations of the research meant sex workers were more likely to respond honestly.

Having sex workers in the leadership of the project maintained the integrity of the project. Whilst conceptualising, negotiating and discussing the project with the funder and potential outreach partners, sex workers were best placed to represent the issues and interests of the sex worker community. Sex workers have pre-understanding of sex work, something that outsiders cannot. This pre-understanding, an important aspect of insider research, enhanced the efficiency of the project and reduced barriers to understanding; the sex workers collectors already had intimate

knowledge of the issues and the naturalistic environment of the research (Gummesson, 2000: 57 cited in Coughlan, 2007, p 296). Using familiarity, personal knowledge and existing expertise is a recognised part of successful action research by insiders (Riemer 1977 cited in Coughlan, 2007, p 294). There are many benefits that a critical understanding of insider research can contribute to sex workers led research.

The pre-understanding that sex workers as insiders have is grounded in the real life needs, practicalities and concerns of sex workers in Australia. Sex workers have the first hand experience to know that a sex industry workplace is a workplace, and are experienced at treating sex worker workplaces as workplaces, not as research sites. This is one of the benefits of insider research; sex worker peer researchers can be trained to implement a methodologically sound research project within sex worker projects because first and foremost we understand that it is sex workers' *workplaces* we are entering into. Non-sex worker collectors are outsiders in that space, sex worker collectors, while having the role of researcher for that interaction, are, by virtue of peer-status, insiders.

When non-sex work researchers enter a sex work workplace, sex workers are not in control of their identity disclosure; seeing sex workers breaches the confidentiality of the sex workers in that premises. By employing sex workers as peer researchers we ensure that even though there is no avoiding disclosure taking place, it is an equal relationship because the trained collector is a sex worker also and discloses themselves as such, thus minimising the power dynamic. Sex workers are part of a culture of identity protection and are less likely to breach the confidentiality of another sex worker.

Van der Meulen explains that due to the prevalence of unethical and exploitative research conducted by anti-sex work feminists:

... it is not uncommon for sex workers to refuse to engage in research studies unless they are members of the research team. Action research philosophies and practices, therefore,

are particularly relevant and important in supporting a growing wave of sex work research that has been endorsed, influenced, and supported by sex working communities.”  
(van der Meulen 2001, p. 370.)

This project provides strong evidence to suggest that insider research by sex workers has a high participation rate. The first phase of survey collection aimed to reach 100 participants in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. After the first 4 months of survey collection with fifteen active peer researchers and over 100 surveys collected, an extension to the scope and timeframe of the survey was negotiated with AIC; with an increased focus on Chinese and Korean collection, and expanding to the regional settings of Toowoomba, Townsville, Newcastle and Kalgoorlie, and encompassing the additional cities of Brisbane, Perth and Canberra, and including an online survey. A further 8 months of collection were added with an intended target of 500 surveys, a target which was exceeded. Over 1000 community education, information and networking sessions occurred- far in excess of the 679 surveys that were collected, 594 which were deemed sufficiently complete and therefore eligible for analysis.

The importance of peer researchers being familiar with workplaces they or their friends have worked at cannot be underestimated as a factor in participation rates for research projects. Other insider researchers have made similar observations. van Heugten notes from her own experience of insider research, that her own knowledge, word of mouth and utilising existing community infrastructure resulted in response rate of 100% (van Heugten, 2004, pg 206)

Use of the pre-understanding with sex worker communities or sex worker workplaces and networks, many built up over years of friendships and/or collegial relationships, meant that peer researchers were well placed to access a high number of potential respondents. The insider status of the sex worker peer researchers in the project meant that they were already networked into that

environment the project were able to build on their existing access to premises and trust from potential sex worker participants.

We believe the insider status of peer researchers and trust that exists in the sex worker community has resulted in accurate and reflective data. In addition to being respectful of sex workers wishes, the explicitly sex worker led and voluntary nature of survey participation, we believe, contributes to the veracity of responses in the survey. Consultation with the Steering Committee on the responses supports this is the case. Other academics agree;

Not only can the inclusion of sex workers in the project design and implementation increase sex workers' support of the project itself, but according to some, the inclusion of local stakeholders in the research project and an equalizing of power imbalances can actually lead to more valid and reliable results based on local expertise. (van der Meulen, 2001, p. 376)

Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) is cited by van der Meulen as arguing that [insider] "...action research is much more able to produce 'valid' results than ordinary or conventional social science" because of the implicit stake that the insider community has. (p. 376)

As discussed in more detail below, the specific insider approaches adopted in the methodology of this project were critically and culturally nuanced. This included the up-skilling of peer researchers, respect for the lineage of the survey instrument, appropriate informed consent processes, use of explicitly optional questions, affirmative action for sex workers of Thai, Chinese and Korean language backgrounds, and community based translation checking were all outcomes of adopting an insider approach to the research.

## **Capacity development and training**

The collector training was only available to sex workers. Affirmative action and payment was implemented for multilingual

sex workers whose first language was Thai, Chinese and/or Korean. Sex workers who spoke English as a first language participated as volunteers. Five training sessions for survey collectors were conducted across Australia, with thirty-six sex workers trained in total.

Melbourne had six participants or 16% of the entire group, Adelaide had eight participants or 22% of the entire group, Sydney had two sessions, with twenty-one participants overall, or 58% of the entire group, and Canberra had one participant or 2% of the entire group (See Table 1)

Table 3: 2010 Peer Researcher Training- Number of sex workers trained who became active researchers.

City	Trained	Became Researchers
Melbourne	6	5
Adelaide	8	3
Sydney	17	12
Sydney	4	4
Canberra	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>22</b>

Where it was not feasible to do training in other states and territories, relevant potential collectors were invited to travel to cities where training was taking place. Participants in the training could then self-select to become collectors. Of the thirty-six trained participants, twenty-four became survey collectors (66.6%). There was no pressure on those who completed the training to become survey collectors. The training was seen as an action learning exercise with an aim of improving sex workers research skills in a range of ways. Even though the training was specific to this particular project, the skills learnt are transferable to other research situations. Overall, the amount of sex worker trained was considered one of the successes of the project and demonstrated the community's interest and commitment to this research.

The training had two components. Firstly Scarlet Alliance conducted training on outreach skills. This included dealing with potential difficult issues for sex workers that may arise as a result of participation in the survey. For example, it was understood that given the types of questions addressed in the survey, it was possible that it could give rise to some discomfort amongst some potential respondents. Steering committee meetings had discussed what these potential triggers might be and what the appropriate responses to these could be. In addition to this, remembering that the outreach was conducted in partnership with existing peer education outreach, those in the training were advised to draw upon the considerable expertise of existing outreach staff in dealing with these issues. The training ensured that potential collectors were aware of all of the support mechanisms in place for sex workers. Role playing these concerns was included in the training, and participants were given a referral list in four languages of organisations that could provide support on a variety of issues. Potential survey collectors without prior experience in outreach were encouraged to actively listen but to ultimately refer sex workers directly to their sex worker organisation, to specialist organisations, or to the police, depending on the presenting issue/s and the wishes of the survey participant. Other aspects of the training included the history of the sex worker movement and peer education. This component of the training was specifically run for sex workers with no prior outreach experience.

To ensure consistency of delivery of the survey, potential peer researchers were taught how to use the "Administration Guidelines" that had been developed specifically for the projects by the AIC. The guidelines went through the steps for collection, interpretations and explanations for the questions. The guidelines also covered the agreed upon method of dealing with unfinished surveys and assisted surveys. Assisted surveys occurred if a sex worker asked a researcher to fill in the survey on their behalf because they were illiterate or had a disability, the researcher could do so. This was only done in cases where the participant requested assistance, unprompted by the researcher. The researcher indicated

it was an assisted survey by marking the front page with an “A”. This allowed for observation of any notable differences from the unassisted survey results. This was an uncommon occurrence with only 11 marked as assisted. The training included going through the background of the survey, response types, and each survey question, including questions that may be problematic, and the optional questions. The participants then had an opportunity to ask questions followed by a role play exercise conducted in pairs. Each participant had a chance to play both the role of collector and survey respondent in a mock collection exercise. This enabled the participants to become familiar with the survey and aware of questions that may come up during collection. It also gave the participant role playing the collector a chance to practise using the administration guidelines and answer potential queries. These responses were then ripped up and disposed of.

As outlined earlier, there were strong community development outcomes associated with the training. 22 sex workers trained in collection went on to do peer education and outreach for the survey. Others got involved in the Steering Committee. And every sex worker who participated reported being more skilled about research and about how to get further involved in their local and national sex worker organisations. In this way the research contributed to increasing the capacity of the sex worker community.

## **Representation**

The project implemented conscious and structural approaches to ensure direct representation and ownership over the project by the community being researched. Scarlet Alliance believes that when English is a second language it is best practise to have researchers who speak the same first language. Sherene Razack describes this critical understanding of power dynamics as place-based feminism (2000, p 39). After the first round of training and collections in 2009 it was evidenced that there was a relatively high number of Thai background sex workers (seven) engaged in the survey collection

project. This is a reflection of the history and strength of the Thai sex worker community in Australia. Thai sex workers are well represented in the survey.

It was identified that there were less Chinese (three) and Korean (one) collectors than Thai collectors. Chinese and Korean language background workplaces were targeted for recruitment to increase the number of Chinese and Korean speaking peer researchers. Three special outreach sessions were conducted within greater Sydney over a fortnight to recruit Mandarin and/or Cantonese speaking participants. This resulted in four Chinese speaking collectors being trained and becoming peer researchers. A week of focused outreach sessions to recruit Korean speaking collectors was also held and while it did not result in active peer researchers, it increased the profile of the project among the Korean background sex worker community in Sydney.

The representation from Korean sex workers, while lower, is still the strongest representation in any survey of sex workers to date in Australia. The small number of peer researchers is also a reflection of the relatively small size of the Korean sex worker population and its shorter history in Australia. Using peer researchers to target workplaces where they already had cultural connections to, that they had worked in, or premises they were familiar with was an important strategy. Sherene Razack, writing about trans-national academic feminist collaboration, makes the point that researchers must have a critical understanding about where they are located, both culturally and geographically (2000). Researchers having peer status, similar language background and comparable migration experience to the sex worker participants was very important to the survey. For example, we know from numerous anecdotal reports on outreach and via our steering committee that most sex workers who were asked to be participants in the survey would experience stigma and racism in Australia because of both their sex work and their racial background. Additionally, migrant sex workers from countries where sex work is illegal and actively criminalised have low trust of authority, due to the frequent and

forcible policing of the sex industry. Many research participants also reported “research fatigue” from having being repeatedly researched upon. A major complaint on this regard was that researchers would come to sex worker workplaces and sex workers rarely saw the outcomes of the research let alone experienced any benefit from participation. Peer researchers from Thai, Korean and Chinese backgrounds understood these very real ethical complications, potential disruptions for sex workers, respect for confidentiality and sensitivity about culturally-specific migration information. Peer researchers were able to adopt a critical anti-racist feminist approach, working through issues and engaging with the target group in ways that is difficult for non peers, in relation to both migration experience and sex worker background.

### **Culturally appropriate and sex worker sensitive informed consent and confidentiality**

Informed consent is a very important issue when it comes to ethical research with migrant sex workers among whom English is a second language.

For confidentiality reasons, this project chose a verbal informed consent process. This process meant the project did not record sex worker participant’s names in any way. Verbal informed consent was used by Scarlet Alliance in the 2006/07 and the 2009/10 survey, and is used in other major contemporary sex workers surveys in Australia, including the Laws and Sexual Health (LASH) survey funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

Verbal communication is very important to the verbal informed consent process. If the researcher does not speak the first language spoken by the participant, it may be unclear if the informed consent form has been understood and agreed to. For this reason, rather than use translation, where collectors and participants spoke different first languages, the information pamphlet in their first language was used to explain and obtain verbal consent. The

pamphlet was produced in English, Korean, Simplified Chinese and Thai, and was given to all potential participants. It included an introduction, research terminology (explaining ethical issues such as consent & recompense), Scarlet Alliance (inviting sex workers to become members and/or attend the National Forum), the Steering Committee (inviting sex workers to get involved and information about entitlements if they did), the survey, confidentiality, sensitive and optional questions and complaints (with a name and phone number for complaints if anyone has them) and a list of contacts for sex worker organisations in Australia, Thailand and Hong Kong.

Verbally and in the project information pamphlet the confidentiality measures were highlighted to sex workers considering participation. Respondents were assured that participation was optional, sensitive questions about migration and home town were optional, sex workers were not required to sign a consent form, regional locations of survey collection were not identified as separate to city locations, the workplace name and address was not linked to the individual survey. Once the survey was complete the sex workers placed it into an envelope, sealed it and placed it inside a box along with all other surveys collected during that outreach session. The unopened envelopes were delivered to the AIC. All envelopes were the same to ensure that the peer researcher could not link a survey to a particular individual. Assuring confidentiality verbally, in written format, and physically (through showing workers the envelopes and the sealed box) were ways the project overcame sex workers concerns about disclosure. Peer researchers did not read any of the individual answers that sex workers wrote down.

The project was careful to ensure that participants to be in control a degree of confidentiality and privacy in relation to migration pathways. This emerged as an issue in the first survey collection 2006/7 collection. The Chinese language sub-group was extremely insistent that participants should have a range of ways to control the level of information shared about their particular migration.

This resulted in allowing for optional answers to questions relating to migration pathways (Jeffreys, 2001, para. 9). For example the steering committee felt that asking sex workers to list either small towns or provinces they lived in or travelled through would unavoidably make the respondent identifiable within the relatively small migrant sex worker community in Australia should this information be published, thus compromising their privacy. Even though the entire survey itself is optional it was felt imperative by the multilingual Steering Committees both in 2006/07 and 2009/10 that these questions were marked as explicitly optional; to reinforce that we were not pressuring anyone to give us information that was potentially harmful or risky for them to share.

This was a successful approach in 2006/7 survey; with more than half of the participants happy to fill out the optional sections (Scarlet Alliance, 2008). The 2010 survey included seven optional questions; five from the section on Migration, particularly related to pathways and debt bondage information, and two from the Work Situation section, on debt bondage information and an open ended qualitative “what advice would you give someone else travelling to Australia”. More than 70% of sex workers eligible to complete questions regarding migration in the recent survey responded to the optional questions in the 2009/2010 survey. Building on the experience of the first survey, action learning and community development were built upon from 2006/07 to 2009/10.

Another lesson from the 2006/07 survey which informed the 2009/10 survey was the importance of translation checking of all written material. Overall the project relied heavily on the multilingual peer sex workers of non-English speaking background on the sub-groups of the Steering Committee to review numerous translations done by accredited translators. Accredited translators use terminology that is socially acceptable to the mainstream community of any given language group. This includes the unintentional use of anti-sex work and anti-sex

worker terminology which would be offensive to migrant sex workers in Australia; the target group of the research. ‘Translation checking’ was conducted at the language-specific sub-group level to enable lively debate about the most appropriate words to use for the specific language-based sex worker communities.

In 2009/10 similar Steering Committee sub-groups were utilised to ensure that specific questions, methodology and outcomes were analysed by language specific sub-groups in Chinese, English, Thai and Korean. The full Steering Committee membership included bilingual sex workers from Chinese, Korean and Thai backgrounds who are part of the target population of the survey. The committee continued to meet roughly every two months for the life of the survey. The Steering Committee was a formal structure to discuss, identify and address cross-cultural issues that provided practical guidance for the research, much of which were incorporated into the project design and implementation, as well as identify when break-out sessions of language specific sub-groups needed to take place.

An example worth noting is where an accredited translator had used words that meant “sex slave” in the places in the survey which referred to “sex worker.” Such a massive difference in intent, within a survey which is designed to tease out trafficking and slavery issues in a respectful and contextualised manner, are so important. A translation error such as this, which was not even noticeable to an accredited translator, would have undermined the validity of the survey. Without migrant sex worker peer based sub-groups to do ‘translation checking’, the project would have been distributing inappropriate material. Even taking into account the role of the accredited translators, it is not an overstatement to say that migrant sex workers led the translation processes.

## **Data collection**

Peer researchers understood that their role was to engage with sex workers as peer educators; participation in the survey was a by-product; the survey itself was completely optional and there was

no pressure on sex workers to participate. Peer researchers took the approach that sex workers are in the sex worker workspace to work, not to do surveys. With this in mind the length of the survey was a very important issue for the Steering Committee and all discussions with peer researchers. A survey that is too long is unfair on both sex worker participants and sex worker workplaces and would discourage participation. Asking a sex worker to take time away from paid work for longer than twenty minutes was determined by the Steering Committee to be unreasonable.

Regardless of who is researching, even as insiders, any survey in the workplace will create some degree of disruption. The project aimed to create the least amount of disruption in sex worker workplaces visited.

For example, consideration was taken for sex workers who did short-time introductions to clients (usually 5 minutes) and/or actual bookings (30 minutes to one hour) while part way through a survey. In these situations, sex workers sealed their unfinished survey into an envelope and if the introduction or booking went for longer than the peer researcher could wait they knew that the peer researcher would take it, unfinished, and leave their gift for participating with a colleague or receptionist. Peer researchers felt that this solved possible confidentiality issues for sex workers; no partially complete or complete surveys were left on premises.

Sex workers also understood that it was fine if they did not want to participate in the survey. The peer education, referrals and other engagement by collectors was made available to all sex workers on premises regardless of their participation in the survey. Services were not withheld from those who did not wish to participate. The process of research and provision of services and support were mutually reinforcing and mutually supportive. Researchers actively learnt from the process regardless of whether the sex worker participated in the survey. Sex workers were encouraged to talk to peer researchers in a safe way outside the process of the survey if they needed support.

The process of de-identification, explained by the peer researcher, and also in the translated information handout, meant that sex workers knew they were able to trust the process and share their information confidently, both in the survey and in person. No information on surveys could lead to Immigration raids or police investigation or prosecutions. Support from peer educators lawyers or police was provided both on the handout and in person. Peer researchers gave participants options including referrals to NGO's, lawyers and/or their local sex worker organisation.

The peer researchers utilised existing informal friendship and collegial networks to reach participants, often including what is considered "illegal" workplaces and thus hard to reach by people outside of our industry and hard to reach by people not of that cultural background. Outreach lists of local sex workers organisations and newspapers were also used to arrange collection in sex worker workplaces.

Many sites of collection were contacted prior to outreach. Where possible peer researchers of the language group of the workplace contacted sex worker workplaces in advance and explained the purpose of the survey, in their first language. Then project information pamphlet was faxed or posted to the worker or owner/ manager/receptionist of the proposed outreach venue, in their first language. Follow up calls were made after the information was received and an appointment time or verbal consent to visit was obtained. Using language specific communication reduced any potential for mistakes or misunderstandings about the voluntary nature of allowing collectors to visit the workplace. It was made explicitly clear to all workplaces that both visits from peer researchers and participating in the research was optional.

Collectors did persist however if they felt a particular workplace was important to attend and perhaps not genuine about their objections. Other ways of gaining voluntary entry included visiting the site at a variety of times and on different days to engage with

different members of management. When collectors assessed that a refusal may have not been genuine, and followed up with a personal visit, they were almost always allowed entry even if refusal had occurred previously over the phone. It was also found that upon arrival, if sex workers at the workplace were immediately comfortable with the collectors, management felt more at ease about allowing the project access.

Sex worker collectors were the best placed individuals to assess the reasonableness with which they were being refused entry. If sex workers in that workplace would be genuinely inconvenienced by the project, the collectors preferred not to disrupt their workplace. For example some workplace simply did not have appropriate space to accommodate collection. Other reasons for refusal included being too busy, having been visited by the local sex worker organisation or other researchers recently, or undergoing renovations.

Peer researchers visited sex worker workplaces (brothels, private sex workers' homes, escort agencies) and service centres for sex workers (sexual health clinics, drop in centres) for the purposes of survey collection. Peer researchers also joined the regular outreach to sex worker workplaces in conducted by the local sex worker organisation where possible. The project consciously chose workplaces across a range of sex industry workplace types and premises to ensure sex workers from a range of experiences were represented. Particular consideration was made for premises that had increased potential to be accused or investigated for trafficking, debt bondage, slavery and/or sexual servitude offences. These included workplaces that Steering Committee members and collectors had heard anecdotal accounts of allegations of poor working conditions, and/or premises that had experienced police trafficking raids. Of these workplaces, peer researchers were able to gain entry 100% all of the time, and surveys were successfully collected from the workers at those premises.

English speaking background workplaces were also targeted by peer researchers for inclusion to ensure comparative groups in the data between sex workers who speak English as a first language and those who speak Chinese, Korean and/or Thai and are working in predominantly English speaking workplaces.

The Chinese, Korean and Thai language clinics of Melbourne, Perth and Sydney Sexual Health Clinics were sites of collection as well. The collectors had spaces for collection at an appropriately discreet locations within the clinics. Triage nurses were briefed on the project and gave potential participants a short verbal explanation about the research and gave sex workers the option to find out more about the research. If sex workers chose to participate they were directed to the area of the clinic where the survey administration protocols were followed in the same way as any other location. At no time did peer researchers solicit participants from the waiting rooms of sexual health clinics.

The Hustling 2 Health peer-only drop in night for street based sex workers in St Kilda, Victoria, was also utilised as a collection site. This was a way of interacting with street based sex workers without interrupting their work in street based settings.

The survey was undertaken in partnership with state and territory sex worker organisations. Formal agreements (MOUs) were established with these Scarlet Alliance member organisations with the understanding that only peer staff who had completed the training could conduct the research. Some of these sex worker organisations had already firmly established relationships with workplaces, which were utilised by the project. Other sex worker organisations made new networks through partnering with the project. Organisations who do not have multi-lingual staff were able to meet non-English speaking sex workers. This highlighted a well-known problem for sex worker projects, those with multi-lingual projects are able to develop strong peer education networks, others without multilingual staff are less able to do effective outreach. This process also created an additional benefit for sex workers by creating new networks within the sex worker

community that were previously unexplored due to a lack of resources.

Partnerships also allowed for sharing networks, capacity building of sex worker organisations, and raising the profile of the local sex worker organisation.

## Conclusion

Meaningful engagement of communities, but especially those that face stigma, marginalisation and criminalisation such as migrant sex workers requires investment in time and resourcing. It can be tempting for researchers to cut corners and time and gain speedier ethics approvals by not involving or researching the target communities at all. Instead some researchers make claims about migrant sex workers or extrapolate on the nature of trafficking in the sex industry by only speaking to a handful of government or non-government agencies and/or service providers “working with” migrant sex workers without ever interviewing migrant sex workers at all. In recognition of the difficulties in gaining access and trust of the more marginalised populations, adequate investment must be made in devising strategies to overcome these perceived and real barriers. In approaching this research, Scarlet Alliance had networks on which we were able to draw upon, but it also meant promotion and outreach to the communities to recruit peer researchers. It required resourcing of participation and investment in interpreting and translation to ensure full and meaningful participation. Ethics approvals processes and MOU’s with partner sex worker organisations in collection was often a lengthy but necessary process. To ensure the meaningful participation of affected communities requires effort, resources, determination and patience but ultimately the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. This process led to increased capacity within the community as well as we believe, more credible research outcomes which can be used to inform policy.

Reinharz suggests human research (such as social research) *should* use human tools, *should* use the researcher as a research instrument

(Reinharz, 1979). Included in these tools are personal experiences and imaginative identification and emotion, which have become recognized as valid sources of scholarly knowledge (Riessman, 1994c). Indeed, Polanyi rejects the concept of knowledge that cannot be attributed to the experience of the individual. He proposes a methodology of passion and commitment as an alternative to impossible and undesirable detachment (Reinharz, 1979) (van Heugten, p. 207).

Sex workers were involved in every facet of the project. Importantly this was a research that came from the community, by the community resulting in benefits for the community. The process used enabled us to address questions and issues significant for our community throughout the research process. Ultimately this leads to more meaningful engagement with the community as the questions asked and the analysis of the data is more likely to be relevant to our experiences and less likely to be misinterpreted. An insider approach resulted in unparalleled access to workers and workplaces, particularly CALD sex workers and to workplaces that are stereotypically considered hard to reach. By having sex workers lead and run the project, those leading the research had an understanding of potential issues and could anticipate effective solutions to potential issues before they arose protecting against confounding variables arising throughout the research, such as confidentiality, racism, fear of immigration, suspicion of authority, and sensitivity about migration information.

We believe this trust amongst peers and of the motivations of the research meant sex workers were more likely to respond honestly thus producing more rigorous data.

In addition to the research benefits, perhaps more importantly the research resulted in capacity development and investment in peer education, representation and autonomy of migrant sex workers of Chinese, Korean and Thai language backgrounds- an invaluable resource for the future of migrant sex worker research. These human resources now exist within our migrant sex worker community. The capacity building process of this research project

was a key consideration in the development of our research strategy. We had employed lessons learnt from the previous research in both the administration and development of the research as well as engaging the human resources developed during the previous research process. All these have been expanded upon and developed further in this research project and will inevitably inform and improve our future research efforts. We hope to build upon the findings that have opened up areas for further inquiry and continue to build the capacity of our peer researchers. Even though the community building aspects were a key consideration for us at all times, there were also a number of unintended benefits that occurred. We believe that keeping community needs foremost and aiming to maintain best practice research approaches led to best possible outcomes on a number of levels. Although it does initially take more time and effort to engage thoroughly and meaningfully with the communities researchers seek to research on, this approach leads to more benefits and a more ethically and critically sound, authentic and rigorous research project.

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## About the authors

**Jules Kim** is the Migration Project Manager at Scarlet Alliance, Australian Sex Workers Association. Jules has been a member of the National Roundtable on Human Trafficking since 2009 and is currently involved in the communication and awareness raising strategy working group for Australia's National Action Plan on Trafficking. From 2009, Jules was the coordinator of the Migration Research Project of sex workers in Australia in partnership with the Australian Institute of Criminology. She has written and presented on migrant sex worker issues both in Australia and abroad and provided testimony and submissions at government hearings in relation to human trafficking, law reform and sex work.

**Elena Jeffreys** is of Italian and Anglo migrant background in Australia, has been working in sex work, community cultural development and harm reduction for her adult life and is currently working on a PhD project with the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland. Elena

has written and published extensively on sex work, migration, sex worker rights and law reform and provided leadership and representation on these issues to community, government and media in Australia.

# Action learning/action research knowledge development and translation: A 'learning conference' experience

Robyn Lynn and  
Michelle Redman-MacLaren

## Abstract

*This article tells a 'learning conference' story about the establishment of a local action learning and action research (ALAR) Conversation Group in a regional city in Australia, which occurred between the Action Learning and Action Research Association (ALARA) conferences of 2008 and 2011. We describe our 2008 conference experience, 2008 post-conference actions, the 2011 conference workshop, and our post-conference reflections in 2011. In detail, we share what we discussed at the 2011 ALARA conference workshop. We conclude by considering possible future action: stay as we are; change the geographic focus from local to a local/national nexus; undertake a joint ALAR project; or share our reflections with the local ALAR group in order to move from discussion to action. In so doing we highlight the value of engaging the 'learning conference' approach for future conferences.*

**Keywords:** Action learning, conferences, knowledge sharing, participation

## Introduction

How many conferences have you been to that inspired you? How many conferences have you returned from with good intentions to incorporate new knowledge into your work and even develop it

further? Perhaps you, like us, find that the motivation and intent are quickly swamped when you return to the perceived 'reality' of your context. In 2008 when the authors returned from the Australian Action Learning, Action Research Association (ALARA) conference we resolved to create a space in our local area (Cairns, Australia) where people interested in discussing and/or enacting Action Learning/Action Research (ALAR) could regularly meet face-to-face to discuss and reflect upon their experiences in a supportive environment.

The elements of the 2008 conference that inspired us were described by O'Connell and Hill (2008). A central element was the Open Space approach, which ensured "emergent needs and issues of participants were supported by facilitators" (2008, p. 6). The qualities of conferences identified by Louw and Zuber-Skerritt (2011), also reflected our approach. Similar to Louw and Zuber-Skerritt, our goal was to create a space that was:

... quintessentially collaborative – learning, researching, discovering together with the support of each other ... non-hierarchical, inclusive, democratic, participative and empowering – precisely the approach for a [meeting] seeking to maximize learning and knowledge creation (2011, p. 290).

We enacted this approach in the ALAR Conversation Group consistent with the action learning principles described by Revans, including learning as re-interpreting the past and the contribution of peers (1998, p. 6-7). We shared our experiences of ALAR projects and collectively enquired into our various projects, gently challenging and inspiring each other.

With these goals in mind, the Cairns ALAR Conversation Group attempted to meet regularly between 2008 and 2011. Our greatest challenge was to sustain regular participation. This ongoing change in the constituency of the group made it difficult to have a participative approach when organising meetings. The challenges in establishing this group resulted in us reflecting with a small group of 2011 ALARA Australasian Conference participants about

possible ways forward. We designed a workshop that told the story of the group through an action learning cycle (Stringer, 2007). We then invited the workshop participants, through a set of questions, to reflect with us on the challenges we had experienced. The questions included the following:

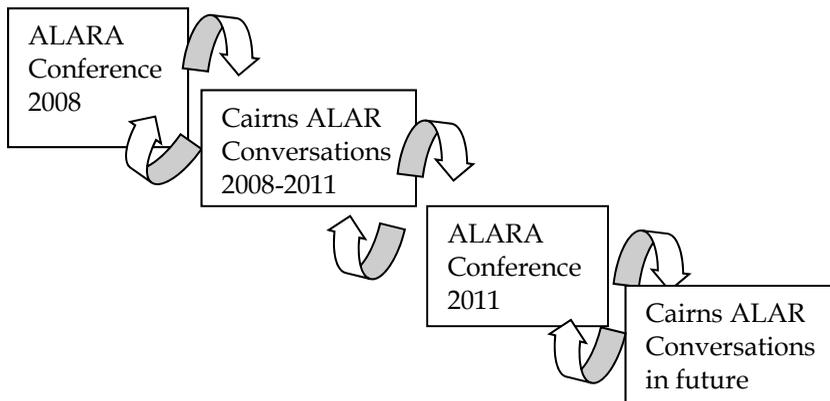
- What would this group 'look' like if participating in it mattered so much that nothing could stop people attending?
- What would it take for that to happen?
- Is it possible? We hoped to draw on the collective and creative wisdom of people committed to action learning/action research. (We are grateful to Rachel Perry, Anne Liley, Josie McLean, Kris Plowman, Cathryn Lloyd, Henk Eijkman for joining us in our inquiry and the contribution they have made to finding some new directions).

Post the 2011 conference, we met to reflect on the workshop and the ideas that had emerged. At the same time, we also read the article '*The Learning Conference*' by Louw and Zuber-Skerritt (2011). This article provided a framework to our story and consciously brought to the fore the ALAR elements of the vision we had for the group. We realised that the decision to create this space in Cairns mirrored, for us, the concept of a conference as defined by Louw and Zuber-Skerritt including "congresses and any other meetings where interested people come together to engage collaboratively, present their ideas, and give and receive feedback supportively." (2011, p.289).

Our attempt to create a local conversation space for action learning/action research had, over time, embodied the four stages of the 'learning conference' cycle (Louw and Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) of: pre-conference; during conference; post-conference; and journal submission (2011, p. 297). One difference for us was the first iteration of post-conference action that focused on planning and implementing action rather than writing for publication. In our case, the post conference action involved local knowledge

development through the formation of a group. In our second iteration of the cycle, we are now writing for publication (in the form of this article).

Figure 1: Diagram representing our stages of the Learning Conference experience



We outline our 2011 ALARA conference workshop and our post conference reflections. We reflect upon the Cairns ALAR Conversation Group to bring positive change:

1. To facilitation and planning of local ALAR groups;
2. To the nature of such groups;
3. From a focus on the current geographic locale to a local/national nexus.

In so doing we highlight the value of engaging the 'learning conference' approach to future ALAR conferences.

## **The Conversation Group – the story we shared at the 2011 conference workshop**

In September, 2011 we gathered in a room of the ALARA Conference facility (a rather large room for 8 people) and told the story of our journey to create a space for ALAR conversations in Cairns. We shared the story using the '*observe, reflect, plan, act*' cycles of action learning. This is the story.

### **Observe**

Cairns, Australia is an international tourist destination with a population of over 160,000 and growing. Over 7.8% of the population is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The city is located in the wet tropics and is known for its proximity to the Great Barrier Reef and the surrounding rainforest areas (Cairns Regional Council, 2011). It is almost 2,000kms from Brisbane, the capital city of Queensland and is closer in location to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The economy is based on tourism, agriculture and mining.

The city has a highly transient population. Workforce issues in the human services and health sectors include low levels of qualifications, limited contributions to professional bodies and not enough people to fill positions (Earles and Lynn, 2009). This puts pressure on existing workers and their capacity to critically reflect and research or engage in action learning/research. Anecdotal information suggests that legitimacy for involvement in the action learning/research group appears to be limited to those whose job descriptions specifically include a project, programme or research that is utilising this approach. At James Cook University there were research projects being undertaken that were using action research methodologies, for example.

The idea of establishing an action learning/research group emerged from the authors' experiences of catalyst workshops at the ALARA 2008 National Conference.

## **Reflect**

We came home from the National Conference inspired, with a rejuvenated appreciation of the value of action learning/research, and the idea of establishing an action learning/action research group. This emerged from our experience of catalyst workshops at the 2008 National Conference of the Australian-based Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA). We envisaged creating a space in our own regional city where people interested in action learning/research could regularly meet to develop their knowledge and reflect upon their action learning/action research (ALAR) experiences.

## **Plan**

To begin our planning we sent out an email to people we knew who were interested in action learning/action research proposing our first meeting. This included academics and practitioners. Both of us were employees of organisations where people were actively using AR or AL in their work and in our planning we assumed they would want to join a conversation. We used a basic community development approach – name your base, develop and expand relationships and find a common consensus about a purpose within the group. There were two (Robyn and Michelle) who connected another three with the idea that those three would connect others.

In the initial meetings, we sought direction, suggestions and volunteers who were interested in using the space of future group meetings to discuss questions or experiences about action learning/research. Those who attended these meetings wanted to have a space where people interested in action learning/research could regularly meet to discuss and reflect upon their experiences. At the end of each conversation, participants identified what they would like to discuss in the next meeting about a project working with AL/AR and made suggestions. This planning also included decisions about the frequency of the meetings and communication between meetings.

## **Act**

Meetings have been held every quarter (or thereabouts) since 2008 and have attracted different people from different organisations each time. The venues are always free and have included the use of rooms in government and non-government community sector organisations.

Michelle and Robyn became (by default) the convenors and identified and organised facilitators/presenters for each meeting. We provided refreshments and small gifts of thanks for the facilitators/presenters. Participants are not requested to give a donation. Some action learning/research practitioners from Brisbane and Sydney have presented in Cairns while undertaking other work here and have always provided their services for free.

There was a loose relational base between the convenors and ALARA (use of ALARA website to promote event, distributed ALARA membership information and journals/newsletter, facilitators were ALARA members). Advice of meetings is sent from our James Cook University organisational base through a range of existing networks.

## **Observe**

Our observations of the meetings were that despite the initial interest in the ALAR Conversation by some people in Cairns, it did not emerge as the sustainable mutually-led group we envisaged. Guest speakers seemed to increase the numbers of attendees, but there were rarely the same people attending the ALAR Conversations from conversation to conversation. This included both Indigenous and non-indigenous guest speakers. The post-conference action was the formation of a group that we envisioned as embodying the philosophy, aspiration and practice of action learning/action research. What developed instead was a series of events being convened.

The quarterly meetings had an attendance of between 4 and 8. In contrast two visiting facilitators to the region attracted between 18

and 35 participants. A number of those who facilitated or presented were not regular attendees. Those who attend are usually people we know. On establishing the group the first two meetings were about 'what is action learning/research'. At these meetings we also discussed sharing organisation and facilitation. This never happened. The group has provided free opportunities for people to learn about process evaluation and ways of knowing. Personally we have had the opportunity to extend our own knowledge about ALAR, maintained our broader commitment to this approach and opportunities to develop relationships in Cairns and further afield.

## **Reflect**

The ever changing and inconsistent composition of the meetings challenges our ability to build a group of committed members and a group culture consistent with ALAR. It has now reached the point where we simply feel like we are event managing when we want to be just part of a group that reflects the principles and values of action ALAR. From these observations we have begun to wonder if our desire to have a group where we could talk about ALAR swamped our enacting of the ALAR processes, about which we were so passionate.

Following our story, we provided questions to aid collective reflection. We had planned to discuss the questions in small groups during the workshop, but due to the small number of attendees we worked together in one group. The questions we asked the group were:

- What did you notice in this story?
- Should we carry on? Why?
- What would the group 'look' like if participating in it was so important that nothing could stop people attending?
- What are the essential elements to establish and sustain a regional group about action research/learning?

- Is there a role for ALARA? What might it be?
- Story co-creation and ideas at the 2011 conference workshop

While some attention was given to the specific questions we asked, there was also considerable sharing of the participants' own experiences of groups along with ideas and suggestions for future action. The story sharing took almost all of the allocated time but through this process, we began the co-creation of another story about establishing and sustaining action learning/research groups.

What conference workshop participants noticed about our experience in Cairns was that guest speakers seemed to increase the number of attendees. This seemed to reflect the common approach to skill development, with an expert coming in to 'tell' us how to work. The risk of this model is that the value of the group members' expertise may be discounted or unrecognised. This approach may also encourage passive participation and learning that is not '...an ongoing and creative process...' (Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, p. 290). This observation generated a group question about how to engage and sustain participation in ALAR groups: 'what do people do with that knowledge or information as a learning process?'

Workshop participants also noticed in our story that work roles were determining people's participation. This contrasted with the idea that people may want to be a part of a group which focused less on the tasks and more on the methodology and methods of ALAR. A number of other questions emerged which shaped the conversation. What is the motivation for involvement in the ALAR Conversation Group? What is the intrinsic journey? Does holding the ALAR Conversation Group within work hours somehow stifle participation? Are there a range of ways of participating in the ALAR Conversation Group - locally (grounded), via web platforms, etc? Are the processes being employed creating dependence, i.e. someone else will organise and 'do it'? We expressed concern about the obvious dissonance between us taking responsibility for the organisation of the group and our

espoused action learning/research principles of nurturing leadership and power sharing. This suggested that we needed to be more explicit about the Conversation process with people who come along to the ALAR Conversation Group?

These questions challenged us to let go of the idea of 'local' and 'face-to-face' to think about what 'local' means *now*, in this context. The realisation made us reflect upon the possibility that we were being dogmatic about a traditional community development approach rather than responding to the group's needs. Could we work differently with others who were interested and like-minded? The workshop participants discussed with us possibilities such as electronically linking with a group of fellow action learning/research practitioners. One workshop participant suggested that we could try using an AL process around the question of engaging and sustaining participation in the groups some of us were already working with. Another participant suggested that we could do a project as a group – try something so people can explicitly experience an AL/AR process.

Throughout this conversation, I (Robyn) was aware that my energy levels fluctuated around the different questions and ideas. For example, I felt lighter and more enthusiastic when we talked about possible interest in electronically linking with a group of people, whatever the size. This contrasted strongly with the feeling of heaviness and weight that I experienced in my body when a workshop participant suggested the Cairns ALAR Conversation Group do a group project. I saw this translating as Michelle and Robyn doing the work to make it happen. I asked myself: "Do I have the energy for this?" Rather than igniting and feeding my own passion that was my motivation for wanting to initiate the Cairns group, I saw my energy and passion for AL being drawn away by the suggestion of 'doing' another project with the group. I (Robyn) was aware of my varying levels of enthusiasm throughout the discussion, fluctuating from hopefulness of connection with others in a similar situation more globally to feeling as if I could not entertain one more project locally in my project-filled world of

work. The discussion ended with the hopefulness of connecting using web platforms across geographical barriers and subject areas.

## **Post conference reflections from Robyn and Michelle**

In this story, the iteration of post-conference reflections begins post the 2008 ALARA Conference with planning and action to create a space that we envisioned as embodying the philosophy, aspiration and practice of ALAR. This unconsciously included notions of ‘co-flourishing and mutual inspiration’ (Artistotle, 1962 in Zuber-Skerritt 2011, p. 288), as an alternative to traditional professional development opportunities. In the context of ‘the learning cycle’, the post-2011 conference reflections begin during the conference, where we reflected “on the comments received and how to use them to enhance [our] paper” (Louw & Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, p. 298). Our post-conference reflections were focused on how to use the ideas co-generated with workshop participants to sustain an ALAR Conversation Group in Cairns.

The workshop at the 2011 ALARA Conference gave us the opportunity to critically reflect upon local processes, and processes employed by the national body of ALARA. This is a network of people interested in ALAR to “generate collaborative learning, research and action” to transform a variety of contexts (ALARA, 2011a). We saw parallels in: (i) our endeavours to engage ALAR conversation and create a sense of community at the local level and limited ALAR member use of web-based platforms on the ALAR website (ALARA, 2011a); (ii) ongoing engagement with the ALAR Conversation Group in Cairns and sustaining membership of ALARA at the national level; and (iii) acceptance of ALAR as a methodology, by employers and government agendas at the local and national levels (ALARA, 2011b). This identified recursion in process between local and national ALAR activities provides us with an opportunity to develop our understanding of and plan activities in Cairns (explored in more detail later in this article).

As a result of enfolded the 'learning conference' concept to our reflections, we have come to realise the Conversation Group was instigated to focus on the use of ALAR by practitioners in different contexts in Cairns and was not about undertaking an ALAR project by the group. It is our experience that an ALAR Conversation Group, that draws on elements of an Open Space approach requires a dedicated facilitator/s and "a core of committed and highly engaged members, whose work it is to develop the broader engagement of others" (O'Connell and Hill, 2008, p. 7). As with conference organising, we must enact leadership for the group to be a success. We have come to realise it was unrealistic to attempt to create a space using a participative leadership model given the limited time and resources of those who were attending the Cairns Conversation Group and ourselves. As the 'accidental' facilitators these constraints meant we were not able to stay true to the elements and qualities of the approaches that inspired us to begin the group.

So when did people attend the group? In our experience, people attended the Conversation Group when they had an issue in their workplace and planned to use an ALAR approach to respond to the issue. Most people didn't meet to discuss ALAR methodologies or methods unless they had a specific task in their workplace on which to focus. The ALAR Conversation in Cairns provided a level of peer supervision and leadership about ALAR processes for people perceived as having knowledge about ALAR (university people, ALAR experts, senior community sector employees). However this did not necessarily foster a level of "deep conversation" or a carrying of the principles beyond the project being discussed (O'Connell & Hill, 2008, p. 9). This hindered "active engagement of individuals so they remain alert to the conversations so as to teach through them and learn from them" (Bresson, n.d., p. 7 in O'Connell and Hill, 2008, p. 10), as is required in Open Space processes. Nor did, this tension enable the creation of a sense of community for the Conversation Group.

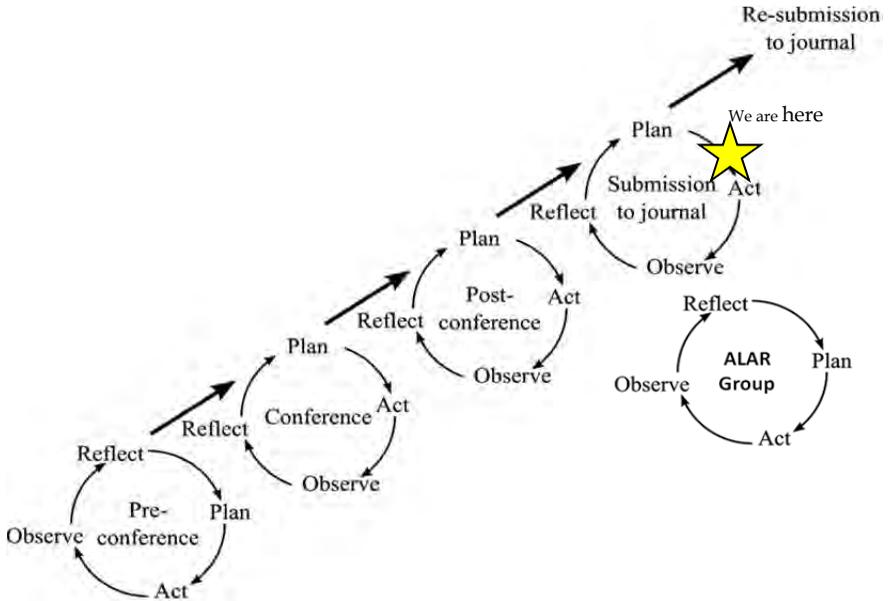
We might have expanded upon the open space model of the 2008 conference, by structuring and developing the group differently. For example, models including communities of practice, communities of learning or peer supervision may have enabled us to draw upon a broader range of learning approaches and ways of knowing (experiential, creative approaches), and could have provided the sense of community that we desired. In addition, more explicit links between purpose, goals and strategies could have informed strategic decisions about the 'next steps'. It may have also enabled the core program to remain responsive to what was happening in the moment (O'Connell and Hill, 2008).

We have been inspired by the Brisbane ALAR group which has sustained itself over some time. This group has four people who take responsibility for convening and organising their meetings, and have done so for over a decade. The primary difference between the Brisbane group and our experience is the identification of a core organising group and the key leaders accepting the role of leadership. This contrasts with our experience, where we were resisting and questioning that role in the context of our own motivation, intent and the philosophy of ALAR.

## **Ending and beginnings: the learning conference cycle**

The application of the learning cycle has informed and extended action for the ALAR Conversation Group. We have enacted the learning cycle as described by Louw and Zuber-Skerrit (2011, p. 299) by preparing this article. Additionally, we have instigated further action-planning for a new type of engagement with the ALAR Conversation Group. This has extended the learning conference cycle into a two-pronged response (represented in Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Adaptation of Louw and Zuber-Skerritt's Learning Conference cycles: two-pronged action



## Next steps

How can this critical reflection guide us for future ALAR Conversations? Are there parallels for other ALAR groups or national-level ALARA activities? Determining our next steps using an ALAR approach would ideally have involved a collaborative process to decide on future action (Stringer 2007). However our capacity to enact this has been hindered by:

- The ongoing tension between our vision of shared leadership and co-participation

- The broad purpose of the group and a failure to resolve more specific goals and strategies around which people could collaborate, and
- Competing demands for those who have been participants.

To address this we have identified the following options for future action:

- *Stay as we are:* This might have been an option prior to our careful reflection on the group processes, but now everything has changed for us as facilitators. Thus our first option is a non-option.
- *Expanding from the local to a local/national nexus:* To remain with the current local focus could mean continuing with the current processes – that is Robyn and Michelle co-facilitating opportunities for discussion with guest speakers about ALAR with a few people each time. But as we have explained, this would require conversation participants to embrace the facilitation and planning of events. Alternatively, the expansion of this pool to include people nationally using web platforms such as *Skype* or other social media could increase both learning opportunities and the pool of potential facilitators for such conversations, consistent with ALAR processes. Two possible forms include: (i) solely using web-based technology from any location or, (ii) local people meeting to join with others using web-based technology, thus linking the local and national. Both of these options require dedicated leadership and a capacity to engage people around ALAR. The question remains, what would motivate people to engage in a web-based ALAR Conversation?
- *To do or not to do a project?* Traditionally ALAR involves learning from action. In our story, we reflected on and questioned the participants’ stories of their ALAR projects rather than collaboratively ‘doing’. The suggestion to develop a project as a learning opportunity for the Cairns

Conversation Group feels hard for both of us. If we undertake an ALAR project on a topic that is highly relevant to and identified by people in Cairns, will they still be willing to use ALAR processes? Will people engage around activity rather than ideas to learn more about ALAR? At the time of writing, neither of us is able to commit to a new project, nor are we confident that the people who have been involved to date with the Cairns Conversation Group would have the time or enthusiasm to engage in a project that may not be a priority to their employer.

- *No further investment in the group:* This option seems unsatisfactory given the time we have spent, the potential we see and the need we have individually for further conversation about ALAR in our local area.
- *Distribute this manuscript to Cairns ALAR Network and invite discussion:* This is the action we have decided to take. We will distribute the manuscript to people who have expressed an interest or have attended the ALAR group previously and will invite reflection and discussion on the journey to date. Any tension that exists between the authors' vision of co-leadership and participants' expectations will be discussed. We hope to encourage a group of committed and highly engaged people from whom we can invite leadership and co-participation (O'Connell and Hill, 2008, p. 7).

## Conclusion

By critically reflecting upon conference experiences (2008; 2011), and by sharing our reflections with the local ALAR Conversation Group, we seek to move the Cairns Conversation Group from discussion to planning and action. By taking this action, we remain consistent with the participative principles of action learning/research and highlight the value of ALARA engaging the 'learning conference' approach for future conferences. We have not yet answered the specific questions we took to the 2011 ALARA Conference, but critical reflection utilising a learning conference

approach has guided us to take action. We offer this paper as another opportunity to expand our understanding of facilitating an ALAR Conversation Group and the value of a 'learning conference' approach to ALARA conferences.

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## About the Authors

**Robyn Lynn** is a Lecturer in Social Work and Community Welfare at James Cook University, Cairns. She uses action learning and action research to help improve professional, organisational and community knowledge and practice in a rural and regional

context. Her current research is in mindfulness and meditation in social work.

**Michelle Redman-MacLaren** has a passion for community development, participatory action research and for the Pacific. As a researcher at James Cook University, Michelle is currently undertaking her PhD with women in Papua New Guinea (PNG), focusing on HIV prevention. Michelle also supports a number of other public health research projects in Solomon Islands and PNG.

# So you think you are doing action research? Indicators of enactment of participatory action research in higher education Marina Harvey

## Abstract

*Action Research is being adopted as a research and project method for the higher education learning and teaching sector. A researcher new to Action Research may need to be scaffolded through the process of validating their research as Action Research, asking the question 'am I really doing Action Research?'*

*A multi-disciplinary team of Action Research Enablers, at one metropolitan university, cogenerated a set of indicators of the enactment of Participatory Action Research in learning and teaching projects. This paper introduces the indicators, their development and the associated tool. The role of the indicators in offering systematised project evaluative data is discussed. Indicators are illustrated with qualitative data, drawing upon the reflective narratives of the Action Research Enablers who engaged in regular supported reflection sessions. The need for the continual development of descriptors and the role of metrics to provide quantitative data are presented as ongoing research issues for Action Research projects.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory Action Research, indicators, higher education, learning and teaching projects*

## Introduction

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Kemmis & McTaggart 1988) offers the benefits of an emphasis upon collaboration and collegiality, essential to multi-disciplinary and multi-level projects in learning and teaching for higher education. The great strength of the model is its inherent flexibility which supports successful project outcomes. Project success is achieved as the Action Research cycle of plan, act, observe and reflect is enacted multiple times and the project adapts and responds to ongoing evaluation of each step and phase. This approach, which connects participation with action, provides liberation of research as it acknowledges and incorporates 'the dynamic social and inter-subjective construction of reality (and realities) as knowledge' (Wadsworth 2011a, p. 61). These positive attributes are recognised through the adoption of Action Research in higher education learning and teaching projects (for example, Harvey 2008; Jones et al. 2012a; Vu, Rigby & Mather 2011).

## Project background

The Leadership and Assessment Project was a national two-year funded learning and teaching project based at a large, metropolitan university. A learning and teaching project is one where 'academics and professional staff ... investigate, develop and implement innovations in learning and teaching' (Australian Learning and Teaching Council 2010 cited in Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011, p. 9). This project aimed to enhance assessment and feedback practices at all levels of the organisation. This main project goal of wanting to enhance practice, to make 'improvements' (McNiff & Whitehead 2011) and 'change' (McTaggart 1997) aligns with the basic idea of Action Research.

Hence, from the project's initial conceptualisation, Action Research, was to provide the methodological framework. Indeed, as the project progressed, the enablers were to reflect upon their

focus on 'action' as well as 'outcomes for social change', which could not be 'precise' but aimed for 'general improvements.' With the goal of developing leadership capacity for enhancing assessment and feedback practice, across all levels of the organisation, it was essential that the multi-level and multi-disciplinary project participants would have ownership, agency and leadership of the project. This project focus and refinement directed the adoption of Participatory Action Research.

The project consisted of three phases: the first twelve months involved three participating departments in the first project phase; another three departments joined the project for the second phase; and six more departments participated in the final six months of the project as phase three. As each group, or wave, of participants joined at each project phase, they grew the community of Action Researchers. Three university departments were represented in the first phase of the project. Participants were staff who had expressed an interest in learning and teaching, and specifically in effective assessment practices. They were known as Action Research Enablers (and to be referred to as enablers). They were paired with a supportive colleague in their own department such as a Head of Department or Dean who could champion the change process. Although three departments were represented, there were four enablers as in one department two colleagues desired to share the role. After the first year, a second wave of four enablers joined the project, culminating with the third and final wave in the last six months.

## **Building in research**

Collegiality is a central cultural component of academic work (Gappa, Austin & Trice 2007) and decision-making (Rytmeister 2009). A PAR approach, which also stresses collegiality, therefore offers an ideological affinity with the culture of the academy. This collegiality was nourished through regular supportive and strategic meetings of the enablers who, together, formed the Leaders in Effective Assessment Practice (LEAP) group. The

approach to leadership was distributed (Jones et al. 2012b) whereby traditional hierarchical leadership was acknowledged, but the focus was on developing the leadership capability of all project participants, recognising that each brought strengths to the project and, collaboratively, would build strengths. This approach aligns closely with a PAR model.

Academics pursue a quest for evidence. A PAR approach ‘...seeks the development of theoretically informed practice for all parties involved’ (McTaggart 1997, p. 30), another example of the ideological affinity of this approach with the research of the academy. The enablers were supported in this quest for evidence throughout the project. A research manager provided ‘developmentally appropriate support’ (Harvey 2008, p. 39) in response to the participants’ project needs given the developmental stage of their own learning and research and the needs of the project. This support included: opportunities to workshop and deepen theoretical understandings; the provision of relevant literature to explore theory; and interactions with critical friends, networks and professional bodies to share expert knowledge including their regular LEAP fora and more formal dissemination avenues such as conferences.

Key to the project, and integral in the PAR approach, was the role of reflection. A key developmentally appropriate support for the enablers took the form of ‘structured reflection sessions’ (Harvey 2008, p. 16) whereby the project manager supported each enabler to regularly and systematically reflect upon two key reflective prompts: the praxis between their developing theory and action; and on their developing capacity as leaders of good assessment practice. These sessions generated reflective data that individuals and the group could draw upon for research.

## **Building in Evaluation**

The Leadership and Assessment Learning and Teaching Project, from its start was focussed on ‘building in research *and* evaluation’ (Wadsworth 2010, emphasis added). Like reflection, evaluation is

part of the Action Research cycle. It is also a requirement of the project funding body which stipulates formal and ongoing evaluation, the appointment of an independent evaluator (Office for Learning and Teaching 2012) and the submission of evaluation reports for accountability purposes.

Appointing a person to the role of an external evaluator could be viewed as an anathema to PAR. It was necessary for the project participants to reconcile this dissonance of roles. Reconciling the role of external evaluator, whilst adhering to the tenets of PAR, was achieved through multiple Action Research cycles where, after rigorous debate, consensus was reached to plan and enact the role of external evaluator as one of a participant observer. The evaluator would adopt a methodology and an epistemology of participant observation (Schwandt 2007). This would be achieved as the evaluator would participate and work in project and advisory meetings and activities, receive all project communications and utilise this data plus observations to inform formative and summative evaluation.

At this time there were limited resources, literature and guidelines available specific to the area of evaluating higher education learning and teaching projects (Huber & Harvey 2012). Indeed the conceptualisation of evaluation for such projects was not uniformly shared nor applied (Huber & Harvey 2012) and generically there were nearly one hundred different models and techniques available (Wadsworth 2011b). The funding body provided an evaluation framework (Chesterton & Cummings 2011) and PAR provided the mechanism to adapt this framework and thereby develop a context-specific evaluation framework and process for the project. The reflections of the enablers spoke of evaluation that could not solely focus on an 'end-point', or be only summative, but had to be 'progressive' and formative, and more widely capable of capturing 'attitudes and observations'.

## **The catalyst: Reflecting on evaluation**

As project participants evaluated and reflected on the progress, success and outcomes achieved by enacting PAR, they began to unpack why this approach worked. An advisory group session on evaluation, facilitated by the external evaluator, followed by individual reflections on the role of project evaluation proved to be the catalyst. Any evaluation would need to elaborate on the 'why' and 'how' of success if it were to provide value to the wider academic community who may consider using a PAR approach for their Learning and Teaching projects. While anecdotes and examples of project success may provide powerful narratives, an investigation that was more coherent and holistic was needed.

The basic steps of the Action Research cycle, as originally conceptualised and suggested by Lewin (1946) of "plan, act, evaluate and reflect" were acknowledged as the strengths of this approach. The multiple Action Research cycles provided both flexibility and adaptability for the project to evolve by responding to the needs of each cycle. Although the enablers shared project goals, they worked differently; with their departments and with their colleagues, adapting their plans in response to any changes and challenges that were presented. Each enabler used different strategies to attain the best fit for their departmental context. A more structured approach may have resulted in failure if alternative research pathways had not been possible.

Through ongoing reflection, the enablers' commitment to, and valuing of, PAR grew. With an appreciation of the role of the PAR approach in supporting the realisation of project outcomes, the enablers were now motivated to move towards a deeper understanding of what made PAR efficacious. The project team thus established that there was a need for a 'systematic methodology' (Harvey 2008, p. 27) to act as an evaluation guide in assessing the key enabling components of PAR and whether they were being enacted in a project. Collaboratively the enablers

started on their journey of answering the question 'are you doing Participatory Action Research?'

## **Method: Developing the indicators**

How to answer the question of 'are you doing Participatory Action Research?' became the focus of reflections. Reflective practice, with its conscientious intention of reflection for improvement, change and action (after Brookfield 1995; Dewey 1910; King 2002; Schön 1983) was to be the main methodological driver for the project and ultimately for the development of the indicators.

Monthly individual structured reflection sessions provided an avenue for reflection-on-action (Schön 1987) and, through the talking aloud session (after Bereiter & Bird 1985; Kucan & Beck 1997), reflection-in-action (Schön 1987) as insights and realisations of the need to adjust and modify plans became clear. An analogous process occurred during the forums which supported 'collective reflective practice' (Curro & McTaggart 2003).

Over an eighteen month period the Action Research cycles had seen the enablers 'engaging themselves with the literatures' (McNiff & Whitehead 2011) (for example Kekale & Pirtila 2006; Margolin 2007). Selection of readings was collectively planned, at times enablers would lead with contributions of literature, at others the research manager would support the fora with relevant readings. The action, of this Action Research cycle, involved reading and discussion at the fora where the critical evaluation of the literature presented was undertaken, all underpinned by the collective reflection.

After this developmental period the eight first and second wave enablers gathered at the LEAP forum, with the research manager and additional critical friends. The group identified the need to develop 'indicators' of PAR. A grounded approach (Glaser & Straus 1967) was used at the forum as a strategy for theorising about and generating the indicators. This approach was compatible with PAR as it supported the enablers' ownership of

the process. Collectively the enablers drew upon the knowledge they were developing through theory and experience to immerse themselves in, and interrogate, their collective selves to identify what aspects of the project identified it as PAR. This Action Research drew upon multiple 'processes' of workshopping, collaboration and reflection (after Burns 1995, p. 14). The criterion driving the processes was identifying indicators that were critical and unique to enabling PAR. The outcome was their joint statement to a claim of knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead 2011) in the form of fifteen indicators.

## **Validation through new lenses**

Multiple lenses were invited to start the validation process of the PAR indicators. In addition to the auto-biographical lens of the enablers (Brookfield 1995), these lenses included those of critical friends such as project colleagues, of national colleagues and of the literature.

### **The lens of colleagues**

The PAR indicators were introduced to the project's advisory group, comprising critical friends from across the university and from the Australian higher education sector. Discussion, initiated by the evaluator, questioning the adoption of the term 'indicator' led to the enablers providing a 'reasoned justification' (McTaggart 1997, p. 39) based on their reflections and rationales. Their justification was that the term indicator best represented their conceptualisation of the purpose of the indicators, namely, to provide data that could *indicate* how well a project was working with the basic principles of PAR. The evaluator also argued the need for metrics, and after much discussion the enablers agreed to test this possibility by designing a likert style scale for each indicator. Their agreement to testing the role of metrics was due to their need to 'keep an open mind' and 'grow yourself'. They spoke of the PAR process as a 'journey' where 'you take others with you on the journey'. The ongoing change was described as a 'treacle

wave of change' that was effecting both 'internal change' and achieving an 'effect on others - external change'.

Next, the enablers met with critical friends, recognised as leaders in Action Research and continued the development of the indicators. One original indicator, of regular participation, was thought to be too broad and needed to be broken into its component levels, resulting in a final eighteen indicators.

### **The lens of national colleagues**

Following the completion of the project, the PAR indicators were workshopped at a national conference on Action Learning and Action Research. Colleagues, with both deep and broad knowledge of Action Research, reflected upon a project they had been, or were, involved with and used this as a frame of reference to complete the PAR indicator checklist tool (Appendix A).

The ensuing reflective discussion provided additional constructive feedback, for example, originally we had referred to indicators of the effectiveness of PAR, and they were more accurately identified as indicators of enactment of PAR; the descriptor for fluid boundaries needed clarification on the emphasis of the participants as researcher; and the phrase 'comfort with the unknown' included for the indicator of emotions. All feedback was incorporated into the version of the indicators that is presented in this paper (Table 1).

*(See table overleaf)*

Table 1. Indicators of the enactment of PAR in a Learning and Teaching project (Adapted from Harvey, 2008)

<b>Reflecting on the [insert project name here], my experience has been of ...!</b>	
<b>Regular participation as part of the project team</b>	<i>that is, involvement over time versus attendance</i>
<b>Regular participation within my department</b>	<i>...that is, involvement over time versus attendance</i>
<b>Regular participation within the university</b>	<i>...that is, involvement over time versus attendance</i>
<b>Regular participation through outreach activities</b>	<i>that is, involvement over time versus attendance</i>
<b>An adequate time frame</b>	<i>Project duration, requires a minimum of 1 semester/ 1 year to effect change</i>
<b>A sense of ownership</b>	<i>For all participants</i>
<b>Fluid boundaries</b>	<i>In PAR there is a conflation of the researcher / participant role, participants are the researchers</i>
<b>Developing confidence</b>	<i>Developing individual confidence over time (part of the developing leadership role)</i>
<b>Acknowledging emotions</b>	<i>... of not knowing, of being comfortable with the unknown as the PAR process leads you</i>
<b>Regular communication</b>	<i>...is pivotal - with individuals and with groups and all with a critical, inquiry perspective</i>
<b>Flexibility</b>	<i>...to respond to contextual (e.g. departmental) needs</i>
<b>Developmentally appropriate strategies</b>	<i>...that is, strategies developed in response to chronological needs</i>
<b>Some project structure</b>	<i>e.g. supported reflection sessions</i>
<b>Collaboration</b>	<i>(Intentionally blank)</i>
<b>Reflection</b>	<i>... individual (autobiographical)</i>
<b>Reflection</b>	<i>... communal (of and with the team)</i>
<b>Drawing on theory</b>	<i>... of literature (versus readings)</i>
<b>Developing credibility</b>	<i>...equals impact</i>

The workshop also provided an opportunity to test the 'usability' of the framework with a wider range of participants. The indicators were found to be useable at this and subsequent workshops, for example, with colleagues who had expertise in higher education learning and teaching.

## **The lens of literature**

Revisiting the literature after the development of the PAR indicators provided another validation opportunity. The indicators share much in common with historical principles of Action Research and PAR. Reviewing these principles (Grundy & Kemmis, 1981; Kemmis & McTaggart 1988; Lewin 1946; McNiff & Whitehead 2011; McTaggart 1997) indicated an alignment between many of the indicators with Action Research principles. The language of the indicators may be different, due to the academic learning and teaching context, but the intent of practice is analogous. The four indicators around regular participation are self-explanatory as are the indicators of reflection, collaboration; an adequate time frame, flexibility and drawing on theory; ownership aligns with both participation and agency. The indicator of fluid boundaries aligns with principles such as research by participants, and changing practice and culture.

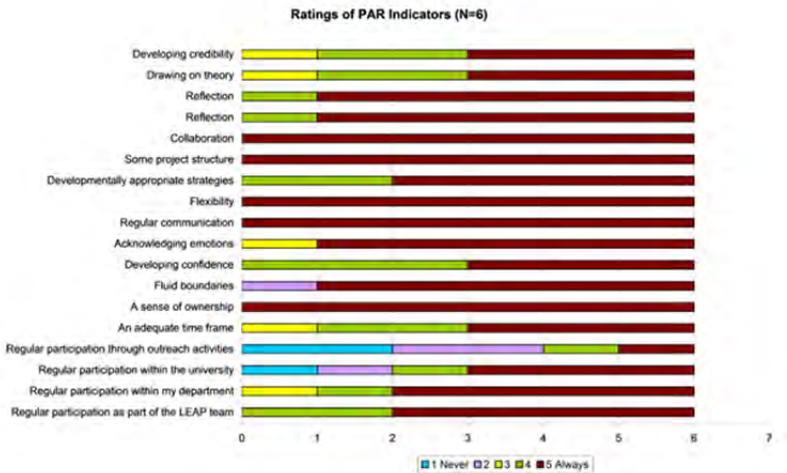
Several indicators were more strongly aligned with the academic learning and teaching context. The indicators of regular communication and some project structure related to project management. So, too, did the indicator of developmentally appropriate strategies as 'adequate resources are needed' to support the enactment of strategies such as supported reflection sessions. The three remaining indicators were highly personal and relational: acknowledging emotions and being comfortable with the unknown; developing credibility across the sector; and confidence to lead change through engagement with a PAR process.

## **The lens of autobiography - piloting the indicators**

Each of the eight enablers, representing six departments, reflected upon the Leadership and Assessment Learning and Teaching Project. This provided their frame of reference to complete the PAR indicator checklist tool (Appendix A). In total, six checklists were completed representing the participating departments. In the departments where the enabler role was shared, the checklist was collaboratively completed. This process worked towards validating the enablers' claim to knowledge through a process of construct validity (McNiff & Whitehead 2011, p. 163).

The reflective prompt used for each of the indicators was 'Reflecting on the Leadership and Assessment Project, my experience has been of...'. Enablers were invited to rank each indicator on the five point likert scale, where '1' indicated a response of 'never' and '5' indicated a response of 'always'. A summary of these ratings is presented as Figure 1. These ratings also invited the contribution of comments to provide some clarification and evidence of why each enabler had chosen their score.

Figure 1 Enabler ratings of PAR indicators



Five indicators received the highest rating by all enablers: collaboration; some project structure; flexibility; regular communication and a sense of ownership. These top five indicators, receiving an 'always' or '5' rating, are now illustrated with the enablers' comments.

Each of the enablers perceived that there had always been a high level of *collaboration*. This collaboration was evident amongst all project participants, with the departmental colleagues they worked with on this project, but especially between the enablers. One justification for this rating was explained as:

I have selected 'always' to indicate that my experience was always one of being part of a collaborative effort. As such my experience throughout this project was quite different from the more solitary experience I am used to when engaged in research.

Although a strength of PAR is its flexibility, *some project structure* is required and the structure provided through individual and collaborative reflective practice was rated highly as: 'It was great

*having the individual as well as group reflection sessions. Invited speakers value-added to the deliberation'. In addition: 'These were very important for reminding me that I was part of a project and the changes were not merely organic'.*

The value of the reflective opportunities offered were explained by another enabler as:

I have selected 'always' to indicate that my experience was one in which I felt my efforts received the appropriate support. The availability of regular LEAP meetings, an influencer within my division, supported reflection sessions, as well as the option of communicating with other LEAP team members at will, combined to create a supportive structure within which to work.

Returning to the *flexibility* offered through the iterative cycles of PAR, enablers appreciated how this permitted participants to adapt, adjust and modify plans and actions in response to contextual demands.

My observation was that the PAR model allowed for the required flexibility. Indeed the idiosyncrasies of the various departments involved in the project were regularly under discussion.

Enablers stated that this flexibility provided participants with the opportunity to '*remain relevant*' and ask of themselves '*could it be possible to undertake such a project in any other (than PAR) way?*' This was a transformative insight for some of the enablers who had started in the project with a traditional and positivist approach to research. They now talked about how one '*could not impose method*'.

A key to the effective management of any learning and teaching PAR project is **communication**, '*I would qualify by saying 'constant' communication. It is communication that is the key to PAR*'. Enablers commented that: '*The quantity and quality of communication throughout the project was excellent*'; and that: '*We had a lot of meetings/discussions at different levels, among the enablers, with colleagues in our Department, across the University*'.

A sense of *ownership* in the project had been achieved as one enabler states:

My experience was that the PAR approach is conducive to fostering a sense of ownership of the project by all participants. Indeed I think this approach serves to maximise the sense of ownership.

At the other end of the spectrum, *regular participation through outreach activities* was the indicator that received the lowest score with most enablers. One enabler shares:

I do critique the concept of 'outreach', as I believe that 'external' communities enter the University through thousands of 'tentacles', not the other way around. However, my leadership learnings are always valuable at the community level.

Throughout the project each enabler had been developmentally supported to participate in outreach activities, including dissemination through conferences and workshops. Yet, they did not have an awareness of these activities as 'outreach'. It may therefore be necessary to focus reflection and share a language around what is included in outreach activities through individual and group reflections.

## **Discussion and implications**

As learning and teaching projects progress through the iterative Action Research cycles, the steps of 'observe' and 'reflect' may raise the question of 'are we really doing Action Research?' An experienced Action Research practitioner with a strong understanding of the principle tenets of Participatory Action Research (PAR) may innately and routinely self-monitor the project's adherence to these tenets. A researcher new to PAR may need to be scaffolded when introduced to Action Research. Structured resources are therefore needed to support the researcher who is newly introduced to Action Research. The PAR indicator checklist tool has two potential roles as it focuses

reflection on the enactment of PAR: to act as scaffolding resource for researchers new to PAR, and to act as a validation instrument for all PAR researchers.

The indicators can act as a developmental support resource for researchers new to PAR. Action Research does not dictate strict methodological steps to participants. For many researchers this leaves them in a wilderness as they seek guidance and direction. A focus on the indicators, which communicate key principles of PAR, presents as an effective strategy for guiding researchers by informing them of the basic pragmatic tenets of a PAR project which can help a new project in its planning and operational stages.

For the experienced researcher, the indicators can provide informative evaluative data for the project, which can be systematically collected at different stages of the project. A high rating across indicators can indicate that your project is enacting the tenets of a PAR project. The checklist can therefore act as a quick and useful formative evaluation tool throughout the project for identifying the project's strengths. This supports a strengths-based approach for all project relationships, enabling the use of participant's strengths throughout each PAR cycle. Conversely, a lower rating for indicators can identify areas requiring ongoing capacity development.

The checklist tool can be effectively used for summative evaluation. Towards the completion of a project, participants can complete the checklist for a final evaluation about the participants' perceptions on the enactment of PAR. Engagement with the indicator checklist, either formatively or summatively, with or without a likert scale, will also act as a strategy for heightening participant awareness of, and focus on, PAR.

Following the development of the indicators the enablers also discussed ways of further validating and strengthening them. Future methods could include a 'control group' when planning a new project, so that the project group was matched with a group

not using the indicators. This would enable evaluative data on the indicators to be collected from both groups allowing some comparisons to be investigated. Indicators could also be reversed as a check for reliability.

The indicators of the enactment of PAR (in a learning and teaching project) have been trialed and found to be an effective evaluation measure of whether or not the basic tenets of PAR have been realised. An additional benefit of using the indicators was the systematic evaluation data collected through the PAR process. We acknowledge that the indicators were applied in a specialised context, of higher education learning and teaching, and were specific to one project. They are therefore offered to higher education colleagues planning to undertake learning and teaching projects using a PAR approach, with the caveat that the indicators may need modification to attain the best fit for their project. We conclude by also extending an invitation to Action Researchers to interact with the indicators and test their transferability to other projects, contexts and applications.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Each of the enablers and members of the wider project community are thanked for their openness of spirit and genuine desire to learn and develop new knowledge. Support for this project was provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd.

## **About the Author**

Dr Marina Harvey (B.Ed; M.Ed, PhD) convenes the Foundations in Learning and Teaching program, and convenes and teaches postgraduate students at Macquarie University where she explores her interests Action Research. Her participatory Action Research is driven by her teaching and professional development practices, the foundation being critically reflective practice in higher education which then supports research into developing quality learning and teaching, academic leadership of learning and teaching and of sessional staff and assessment. Her publications and grants reflect these research interests.

# Achieving educational sustainability: A PALAR reflection of success

Leone Cameron and Bill Allen

## Abstract

*This paper reports on the trajectory of a two-cycle participatory action learning action research (PALAR) project conducted in a third-year course at a regional university in Queensland, Australia. Students in the course exhibited problems that affected commitment and retention, including extensive work and family commitments; inconsistent classroom engagement in multicultural relationships, and differing interpretations of course requirements. Concurrently, the author wished to improve her practice. Our approach chose to combine a business model of action learning with more traditional action research cycles and the latest PALAR values. Student and academic critical reflection and peer consultation informed the transformative model of sustainable education, supported by values such as trust and respect and a 'toolbox' of interventions designed to enhance student engagement and commitment and deepen cross-cultural relationships. These positive outcomes helped more fully realise both student and academic potential.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory action learning action research, participatory action research, PALAR, educational sustainability, academic praxis*

## Introduction

There are both empirical and methodological purposes to this paper. First, the paper contributes to the literature through an experiential purpose that examines student commitment and illustrates how building multicultural relationships can contribute

to retention. Second, from a procedural perspective, it identifies the contributing factors made by participatory action learning action research (PALAR) to the development of my (the first author's) teaching practice and self-esteem. Third, it demonstrates that student commitment can be improved through creative learning tasks and a 'toolbox' of support activities that can be tailored to a variety of educational environments.

## **Defining the problem**

This PALAR journey began as the reflections of an early-career researcher with an intense desire to develop my academic practice and increase my students' commitment. Problems faced in one particular class included low levels of student commitment and engagement, juxtaposed with my own low self-esteem as I reflected upon declining scores in the university's formal instrument for gathering student feedback on teaching (SFT). I was facing what Whitehead (2008, 2009) referred to as a 'living contradiction', in that the behaviours of my class and my own performance were not what I intended or valued (Blumenberg, 2001, p. 2). For six tutorial classes my SFT scores were between 3.2 and 3.6 on a 5-point Likert scale. This feedback intensified my desire for change, but challenged my self-esteem and, therefore, my self-confidence in a 'catch 22' situation. According to Blazer (2010), such self-esteem issues among academic staff can have negative effects on student motivation and likely contributed to the motivation and commitment issues of students in my multicultural third-year business class.

Student attrition and progress impacts upon universities across Australia, but for my small regional university, maintaining student numbers has been a particular problem – it has been consistently ranked as one of the lowest performing universities in Australia (34th of 38) with regard to attrition. Associated factors include the high proportion (49.8%) of students who are first-in-family to attend university (SIAU, 2013); in addition, many must work up to twenty hours per week (USF, 2013) as well as manage

their study. Currently the overall attrition rate is 23.8% for bachelor students (new students, 32.0%; continuing students, 19.2%). The continuing student attrition rate in the Faculty of Business was worse – 21.6% – while the attrition rate of international students was 20.9%; hence the need to engage and retain these students.

## **Educational sustainability and the PALAR process**

In terms of educational sustainability, Dimitrov (2010) claims that it is not always clear what exactly is being sustained. We used the definition of educational sustainability of Sterling (2008) who suggests that it 'relates to a change of educational culture ... a transformative paradigm which values, sustains and realises human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social ... well being'. Educational sustainability, however, also concerns the responsibility of educators to prepare learners for a better future (Jennings, Kensbock, & Kachel, 2010; Young 2006; Young & Muller, 2007). As an academic, I strive to both assist the realisation of my students' potential and to enhance my own human potential, in this case through positive PALAR partnerships. Sterling (2008) further insists that sustainable education 'emphasis[es] ... such values as respect, trust, participation, community, ownership, justice, participative democracy, openness, sufficiency, ... critical reflection ... and a sense of meaning. (p. 66). Zuber-Skerritt, Wood and Dick (2012) also remind us that 'sustainability' should be the 'capacity to maintain the outcome' (p. 188). Therefore, the sustainability discussed here refers both to the teaching and learning situations outlined below, and to my capacity as an academic to maintain the outcome of increased levels of pedagogical support for and between my students.

The transformational PALAR paradigm allows practitioners to work together with students to change the educational culture and attain greater commitment (Dhillon, 2005; Sterling, 2008). The outcomes of this project developed within an academic environment centred around Sterling's (2008) values of sustainable

education listed above, particularly the opportunity for critical reflection on the part of my students, peers and me, which has been supported by the PALAR process.

This two-cycle PALAR project aligns with Lewin's (1946) action research method, described as a 'spiral of steps' (Carr, 2006). These cyclical spirals sustain the search for and validation of knowledge through the integration of holistic and inclusive processes that encourage engagement, participation, critical reflection and systematic thinking, which augments and cultivates partnerships for change (Somekh, 2006). The problems identified and methodologies applied as part of these two action learning cycles are the ideal foundations for maintaining and sustaining learning outcomes and 'a shared commitment to education, [one] that empowers people for change' (ARIES, 2009). The process has enabled a sense of achievement through the realisation of human potential, while also enabling the development of new and exciting transformative educational practices that will continue to inform ongoing learning and teaching cycles.

## **Developing a plan**

### **Action learning**

The initial plan was to use action learning (AL), the most appropriate method of working on real issues through a 'continuous process of learning and reflection with the support of a group' (McGill & Brockbank, 2004, p. 11). I met Professor Reginald Revans in the early 1980s and admired him as a pioneer of action learning and an influential figure in British business, industry and academic circles. He pioneered the use of 'non-experts' or 'practitioners' asking questions about their own performance and practice in arrangement with others to solve business problems and improve performance through the use of AL. Revans suggested 'learning could not exist without action, and action could not exist without learning' (Pedler, 2012, p. xxi). To Revans, AL was 'not what a man already knows ... but what he does not know', and he posited that 'men start to learn from each other ...

only when they discover that no one knows the answer but all are obliged to find it' (Pedler, 2012, p. 6). The unequivocal simplicity of Revans' message is embodied in his action learning equation:  $L = P + Q$ ; that is, learning = programmed knowledge plus questioning insight – knowledge that comes from what we think for ourselves (Deakin Prime Corporate Education, n/d, p. 1). This simple equation demonstrates the interconnectedness of self-reflection and the development of 'knowledge and power' (Foucault & Gordon, 1980) to create the 'L' of educational sustainability. To assist the journey to educational sustainability, Revans asked three questions: *What are we trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What might we be able to do about it?* (Pedler, 2012, p. 12).

### **The PALAR paradigm**

On reflection I chose to introduce the relatively new paradigm adapted by Professor Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt in 2011, that is, participatory action learning action research, or PALAR. My classes exhibited a range of problems not uncommon in tertiary contexts, but which provided a fertile area for conducting a transformative PALAR study. PALAR was first introduced in 2011 by Professor Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt in her book *Action Leadership: Toward a Participatory Paradigm*. PALAR grew from the two philosophies of participatory action research (PAR) and action learning (AL). This paradigm combines AL as previously identified with participatory action research (PAR) (Wadsworth, 1998). Zuber-Skerritt, (2011, p. 6) defined PAR as 'a democratic or non-coercive process whereby all relevant parties (participants) are involved in actively examining together current action in order to improve or change it. They determine the purpose and outcomes of their own inquiry, that is, active co-research.' Participants actively engage in examining actions to learn from and improve those actions in the future through the AL paradigm. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) maintains that it is a useful methodology that can continue to be enhanced through self-critical awareness, continual significant dialogue and public interpretation, or through 'individual and collective reflection and structured discussion' (p.

84). She confirms this participatory action learning experience as a research approach that is 'effective in unpredictable and changeable situations' (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009, p. ix). Additionally, O'Connor et al. (2013) found PAR particularly important in the contribution that it makes through its 'explicit invitation to students to explore and develop their understandings' (p. 125). Hence I chose the PALAR method to change my teaching practice through exploration, problem sharing and collaboration while achieving 'open, honest and rigorous' research outcomes (McGinty & Waters-Adams, 2006).

## **The project**

The project comprised two cyclically connected PALAR interventions. The methodology chosen for implementation combines the model of continuous refinement and development described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) with the action learning model proposed by Revans in 1984 (Pedler, 2012). An aim of both PALAR cycles was to increase student commitment to the course through engagement, participation and ownership. The second action research cycle built upon the outcomes of the initial PALAR mission in this regard, but also focused on another unresolved issue that emerged through the student self-reflections in cycle one. This issue involved building multicultural relationships of trust and participation between students in line with the characteristics of educational sustainability advanced by Sterling (2008). Thus, this evolving PALAR process can be viewed as two cycles of the same transformative research, as in the model of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).

The PALAR paradigm embedded Biggs' (1996) principle of constructive alignment, applied through the reflective practices of Revans (Pedler, 2012) AL. Each of the two PALAR cycles included contextual modifications to practice to develop an engaging delivery aimed at deepening and enriching my students' educational experience. Teaching activities sought to involve and support (through collective reflection) diverse learning styles and

cultures whilst maximising student participation and engagement to promote commitment. Simultaneously, professional development as recommended by Carr and Kemmis (1986) occurred.

Specifically, the first cycle focused upon identifying and overcoming the issues that detracted from students' commitment to their studies. This cycle used PALAR and a 'toolbox' of activities to increase student engagement. Outcomes of the cycle included very positive feedback in terms of recorded student reflections, as well as increased tutorial engagement and improved attendance rates. In the second PALAR cycle, the toolbox of student engagement and commitment activities introduced in cycle one was used again, along with additional tools that further contributed to significant engagement. This positive effect in turn helped to build and enhance relationships between both domestic and visiting international students (those who are completing their whole degree here in Australia) and study abroad students (those who are only studying in Australia for one or two semesters); for the purpose of this paper all of these students are referred to as international students.

In practical terms, both the students and I, the academic, actively engaged in the PALAR process. Students worked in PALAR teams to examine a business's actions and thereby assist the business to improve outcomes. From the AL perspective, my students were actively engaged in taking program knowledge from their lectures, tutorials and readings and asking Revans' three questions of their business-owner 'client' in a real-world learning experience. As an academic, my experience of 'learning from each other' took the form of regularly sharing ideas with peers: fellow postgraduate students; Faculty of Business colleagues; and the academic teacher for my postgraduate course, who acted as one of my two mentors in terms of solving the problems of engagement, commitment and relationship building that were the focus of this PALAR project. My second mentor provided encouragement from a learning and

teaching perspective. My students and I also formed another partnership for learning from each other.

## **The contribution of dialogue and written reflection to the PALAR cycles**

Dialogue and written self-reflection has continued to grow as a means of studying experiences in social geography, health education, teaching and sociology. Critical self-reflection and dialogue can provide the basis for understanding teaching-learning relationships. Action research into the reflective practices of nurses found that dialogue and reflection helped students to 'learn to see the world for themselves because the teacher cannot see the world on [their] behalf' (Wong, Yuen, Wong, Tse, & Kan, 1997, p. 479). Pandit and Alderman (2004) concur, suggesting that dialogue and written reflection 'gives students the opportunity to construct their own knowledge' (p. 134). In both cycles of this project, students' dialogue and written self-reflections were used to better understand how students were 'experiencing their world' of commitment in multicultural classes, as well as to realise and understand personal issues. During both cycles, critical self-reflection also enabled me to deconstruct my own assumptions relating to knowledge of self and others.

The choice of student dialogue and written reflection to inform, develop and adjust both PALAR cycles is supported by the work of Pandit and Alderman (2004), who recommended its benefits for intercultural understanding in human geography classes. In their study, student dialogue and written reflections were key processes in the students' construction of their own knowledge of intercultural understanding, which was expressed through higher levels of engagement and commitment. It also enabled the students to better understand their own feelings in terms of their own personal pressures, thus enabling them to 'sustain and realise human potential' (Sterling, 2008, p. 66).

In terms of constructing my own knowledge, Coles (1989) suggests that the academic only becomes informed by the students if the

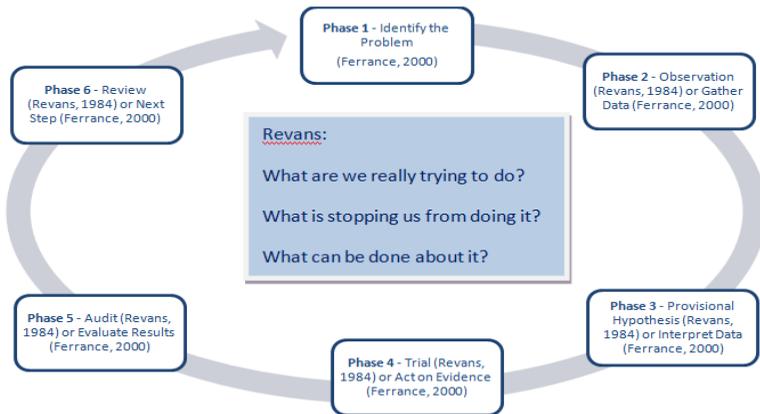
academic is prepared to become the learner and is keen to be informed and educated by the reflection and dialogue of students. Hence I chose initial dialogue with the students, followed by students' written self-reflective responses to open-ended questions. This process enabled me to construct my own knowledge of the students' situation in an open and uninhibited way by synthesising their unreserved opinions of the sequence of events and outcomes.

Personal self-reflections, by way of a weekly diary of events, and discussions with peers and my mentors also informed my decisions during both cycles and directed changes to my teaching practices. Zuber-Skerritt (2009) confirms that PALAR can support change in tertiary classrooms. Similarly, Ferrance (2000) maintains that systematic reflection and dialogue with colleagues enhances academic professional development.

### **The first PALAR cycle**

As noted previously, Revans (Pedler, 2012) posed three important questions to ask in action learning projects: (1) What are we really trying to do? (2) What is stopping us from doing it? (3) What can be done about it? These questions provided a framework for seeking understanding while working through the phases of the PALAR cycles. Many models of action research could have been chosen for this project. The model chosen has been based on Revans' five phases of action learning (Pedler, 2012) and Ferrance's (2000) six-phase model of action research (Figure 1). In this adapted model, step 1 of Ferrance's model aligns with the three questions posed by Revans (Pedler, 2012).

Figure 1: Phases of the PALAR Cycle



**Phase 1 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Identify a problem.* Observation of student attendance indicated student engagement and commitment diminished by week 5 of semester. However, the model demanded I ask: *What was it that I was really trying to do?* In terms of the PALAR paradigm, what caused student disengagement and how could student commitment be improved? Could my teaching practices be changed, thereby re-engaging students and renewing their commitment?

**Phase 2 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Gather the data* (observation). An open-ended questionnaire gathered students' reflective responses – Revans' 'Q', questioning (Pedler, 2012) to inform the research and provide a shared vision.

**Phase 3 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Interpret the data* (provisional hypothesis). Interpretation of the students' responses was assisted by qualitative data analysis using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), NVivo. Students' responses were coded, which provided an 'accurate and transparent picture of the data whilst also providing an audit of the data analysis process' (Welsh, 2002, p. 1). Weitzmann (2000) claims this process

assists in theory-building. It also contributed to the answer of Revans' question: *What is stopping us from doing it?* (Pedler, 2012). Reflective responses with regard to participation, engagement and commitment enabled interpretation of the factors impacting upon students' commitment. Gibbs (2004) confirms that, when using NVivo-style programs to interpret data, the person interprets the text rather than the computer. The analysis revealed several impediments to student commitment that could not be altered within the semester, such as family and work commitments, the amount of required reading, and the nominated textbook. However, impediments that could be addressed provided answers to Revans' next question: *What can be done about it?* Answers included presenting and explaining what was required to achieve the learning outcomes; providing examples; answering questions and providing understanding and help where required.

**Phase 4 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Act on the evidence* (trial). A 'toolbox' of engaging learning activities was developed, including the introduction of student PAL teams. The toolbox activities were designed to close the student engagement and commitment gap by enhancing my teaching practice (Penney & Leggett, 2005). The first tool was weekly tutorial activity sheets to clearly identify learning objectives. The activity sheets provided concise guidelines for student decision making on their PAL projects, thus creating a basis for constructive alignment of objectives and learning activities. Examples of marking sheets and past assignments, supported by in-class discussions, were another tool used to enable the students to 'creat[e]... meaning' (Biggs, 1996, p. 348). A third tool was to email students who missed class, which encouraged re-engagement and demonstrated support.

**Phase 5 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Evaluate the results* (audit). Students' reflective comments were again sought to evaluate the impact of the toolbox of changes on classroom engagement and PAL team commitment. Students' reflections identified the benefits of the interventions to date, as well as remaining commitment gaps

and, therefore, the need for a second PALAR cycle. Feedback was obtained on the individual components of the toolbox.

- a) Weekly tutorial activity sheets: the intent was to provide concise guidelines for weekly study and PAL commitments. Students were asked if these work sheets needed to be improved (Table 1).

**Table 1: How can I improve my tutorial work sheets next year?**

- ✓ I found the tutorial work sheets pretty good as they are!
- ✓ I found them to be a little too cluttered – maybe make a little clearer next year.
- ✓ I would have gained more benefit had they been all listed on Blackboard at the beginning of the semester.

*Source: Student reflective responses*

Student reflections proved very constructive, with honest comments translating into practical classroom tools and decisions on curriculum development that would prove beneficial in the next PALAR cycle. NVivo-coded reflections were organised into themes (nodes), which enabled interpretation of statements ‘beyond what is articulated by [the students]... [in order to be] more fully understood, explained and evaluated (Bergin, 2011, p. 8). From an academic perspective, I gained an understanding of the students’ situation and, with the support of my own PALAR team of reflective practitioners I was able to more concisely construct knowledge of my own teaching practice.

- b) Marking criteria and past assignment examples: Students’ reflections on this tool (Table 2) contributed to instructional alignment (Cohen, 1987), which allows students to clearly understand the links

between established curriculum and assessment methods. As an instructor, these reflections contributed directly to my knowledge of curriculum design and to the next PALAR cycle.

**Table 2: Have examples of marking sheets and past assignments helped engagement and commitment?**

- ✓ Provide it earlier in the semester.
- ✓ This has been quite helpful.
- ✓ I think the way you deal with the marking sheet is good enough.
- ✓ Maybe spend a little longer on this – I felt a little rushed.

*Source: Student reflective responses*

The introduction of student PALAR teams assisted in building constructive alignment between the students' 'real-world' assignment task and the course objectives. Students learnt from experience (giving meaning to knowledge) rather than being taught (Pedlar, 2012). The audit of student reflections also informed the second PALAR cycle.

- c) Emails sent to students who had not attended class: This simple intervention tool proved highly successful. Interestingly, a gender difference in responses occurred: female students responded promptly and most favourably to the emails, with re-engagement in the following week, whereas all male students did not respond directly to the emails. However, all those contacted re-engaged in the next tutorial.

**Phase 6 of the first PALAR cycle:** *Next steps* (review). This phase enabled quiet reflection and inquiry. As a PALAR practitioner, all the action within this cycle contributes to inquiry (Torbet, 2001). My diary reflections, weekly reviews with critical friends and mentors, discussions with fellow academic peers and teachers, and

presentation of progress to a faculty learning and teaching forum all increased my confidence and helped develop my own meaning from the knowledge gained within this first PALAR cycle.

In terms of personal success, the project's first cycle produced two benefits. First, my teaching scores in formal student feedback (SFT) increased by 8%. This result profoundly affected my self-esteem and confidence. The second personal success was to have successfully identified some issues that affected student commitment, and to have developed a successful toolbox of activities that assisted student PALAR team members to deal with their real-world projects and concurrently develop their cognitive abilities. Feedback indicated both engagement and commitment had been improved, as well as students' PALAR activities, thus contributing to their 'L' learning (Pedler, 2012). The success of the first phase awakened me to Biggs' (1996) philosophy that, as an academic, in order to 'do things differently' it was important to focus on 'the learner's world' (p. 349).

### **The second PALAR cycle**

The second PALAR cycle provided the opportunity to once again use engagement to enhance commitment. Notwithstanding the success of the first PALAR cycle, the students' reflections identified another factor affecting successful engagement and commitment that remained unresolved. This problem was a failure of domestic and international students to cooperate and collaborate in an environment of tolerance and acceptance. Students reflected that this fissure impacted upon their learning and teaching environment. Thus my intention in this second cycle was to employ Biggs' (1996) philosophy: to tune into the learner's world and do things differently to address this issue and to build relationships between domestic and visiting international students.

**Phase 1 of the second PALAR cycle:** This cycle began by returning once more to Revans' questions (What are we really trying to do? What is stopping us from doing it? What can be done about it?) (Pedler, 2012).

This second cycle began with the *identified problem* arising from the first phase, that is, a divide appeared to be occurring in relationships between visiting international students and local domestic students whilst working on their PALAR projects. After the first successful PALAR cycle, I was convinced this cultural divide could be reduced by adding appropriate activities for curriculum support to the toolbox. The tools were designed to build relationships around the principles of educational sustainability, providing 'a change of educational culture ... a transform[ed] paradigm [in] which values sustain and realise human potential in relation to the need to attain and sustain social ... well being' (Sterling, 2001, p. 22).

However, what was it that I was really trying to do? Anecdotal evidence suggested action was needed in terms of both curriculum redesign and my teaching practice. I decided to build my teaching practice around diversity and 'an environment that encouraged tolerance and acceptance toward multiculturalism' (Stevens & Ogunji, 2011, p. 541). I received funding through a Learning and Teaching Seed Grant to tackle this problem through the second PALAR cycle. My personal objective was to give new meaning to my knowledge of students' perceptions of tolerance and acceptance of diversity in multicultural classes. I needed to identify how students could be encouraged to form positive, lasting cross-cultural relationships that enhanced commitment through engagement in activities that contributed to the students' cognitive creation of knowledge.

**Phase 2 of the second PALAR cycle:** *Gather the data.* In week 1, reflections from two focus groups were gathered and an open-ended questionnaire was also administered to obtain students' reflections. A research assistant conducted one focus group with domestic students and one with international students. This process enabled a spontaneous flow of key ideas (Kruger, 1988) and a full and frank discussion of issues concerning the course and cross-cultural relations by providing a 'non-threatening ... outlet for criticisms and suggestions' (Jordan & Ong, 2011, p. 9).

**Phase 3 of the second PALAR cycle:** *Interpret the data.* Students' comments were again keyed and coded using NVivo, and the data organised categorically and reviewed repeatedly to reflect upon and expose 'the learners' world' (Biggs, 1996, p. 349). From the students' reflections, themes – identified by word frequencies – emerged, particularly ways to enhance students cross-cultural relationships. These themes provided the focus for improving my teaching practice by doing things differently (Biggs, 1996, p. 349). Again, this led to Revans' next question: What can be done about it? (Pedler, 2012). And again I elected to act upon only those factors that could be addressed within the thirteen-week semester.

**Phase 4 of the second PALAR cycle:** *Act on the evidence.* The reflections suggested methods for building diverse relationships and activities to enhance engagement and commitment in the multicultural class. I focused on qualities aligned to Sterling's (2008) definition of educational sustainability (respect, trust, participation, community, openness and a sense of meaning). A simple toolbox of interventions was introduced again, which included methods of engagement that encouraged commitment to diverse relationships – activities that promoted collaborative outputs from teams and contributed to building trusted relationships. The tools used were name tags; weekly icebreakers; ensuring team members for group activities were from diverse backgrounds; rotating group members; self-disclosure activities; and encouragement of PALAR group cohesion built around acceptance and tolerance of others.

**Phase 5 of the second PALAR cycle:** *Evaluate the results.* Students' reflections on the changes were again sought. NVivo reflection frequencies revealed the toolbox interventions had overcome many cross-cultural biases. For domestic students, the most significant positive contribution was made through enforced cross-cultural engagement; international students found activities built around collective outputs most important in building relationships. These findings support those of McGowan (2012). Also, the increased awareness of multicultural variants found amongst PALAR peer

groups agrees with Smith, Johnson, Powell and Oliver (2012) and Hertz-Lazarowitz, Zelniker and Azaiza (2010).

A wide variety of responses to a question about relationships and commitment were afforded (Table 3).

**Table 3: Tell me about the things that enhanced your relationships and commitment as a student in this multicultural course?**

- ✓ Interactive tasks and the promotion of creative thinking
- ✓ The fun atmosphere of both the lectures and the tutorials – thank you Leone for making this one of the most enjoyable classes I have been a part of here at USC
- ✓ By being involved in presenting a case study in class, developed my confidence and enhanced my commitment
- ✓ Working with my classmates in class, discussing issues related to the course and assignment tasks assisted my commitment
- ✓ A great practical case study application; this was much better than a theory case study and assisted my level of commitment
- ✓ This was the most enjoyable class – this made my level of commitment higher

*Source: Student narrative responses*

My own PALAR self-reflective diary recorded my practices, for example, my dialogue with critical friends and peers, who encouraged me to ‘look at the familiar in new ways which may lead to ... reform’ (Schwarz & Alberts, 1998, cited in Pyle, 2009, p. 168). My diary developed my connections and positive memories as a reflective practitioner (Jalongo, Isenberg, & Gerbracht, 1995). Exposure of my personal struggles for ‘professional growth’ mirrored those of Porto (2008, p. 185) as I dealt with ‘my feelings,

emotions, values, and beliefs ... as I struggled to modify my classroom practices to make my teaching more responsive' to the needs of my multicultural classes. My professional growth was rewarded by my students' movement from tolerance and acceptance to relationships of friendship and trust. The positive effect of the PALAR project was again validated by excellent SFT scores, which increased by a further 12% in the second cycle. In addition to these substantially increased scores, qualitative student reflections in the SFT confirmed the success of my intervention (Table 4).

## **Discussion**

This paper reviews the success of a project consisting of two PALAR cycles. The first cycle was undertaken to encourage student commitment through enhanced engagement. The second cycle evolved through feedback during the first cycle and, as well as furthering the work of cycle 1, aimed to develop relationships between domestic and visiting international students. As well as fostering improved personal relationships based on respect and trust between students from diverse backgrounds, the intention was to increase student commitment and thereby increase student retention. During each cycle, students' PALAR teams creatively and successfully resolved issues for regional businesses as part of their class activities and assessment. McGowan (2012) also found that incorporating creativity can increase students' interest and engagement.

There are three main grounded positivist criticisms of action research: contingency of the research findings; low control of the environment; and personal over-involvement (Kock, McQueen, & Scott, 1997). However, those practicing PALAR can use the critical feedback obtained through the process to better understand and, thereby, grow and improve their practice. In an examination of three different research paradigms – positivism, hermeneutics and action research – Brannick and Coghlan (2007) affirmed the value of insider research. As an inside researcher, and to answer such

positivist criticisms of the method, I followed the recommendations of Carr and Kemmis (1986) by including two 'critical friends' in the form of academic mentors, who provided thorough assessment, input and evaluation of my PALAR project.

An overarching aim of both PALAR cycles was to create an environment of respect, trust, participation and student ownership of the learning process that would contribute to educational sustainability as recommended by Dimtrov (2010). By building the characteristics of educational sustainability into the toolkit of activities, student engagement and commitment increased. Thus the students in PALAR teams working on real-world business projects embodied Revans' 'L' learning (Pedler, 2012) that supports cognitive development. The project has particularly benefited those international students who struggle with the daily challenges of making and building relationships in addition to coping with their studies.

During the first PALAR cycle, feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive towards the activities introduced to support student understanding of and engagement with the requirements to achieve curriculum outcomes. Using NVivo frequencies of student self-reflections on the question 'What factors detracted from your ability to commit to your studies?' the responses in order of importance were language, workload, different expectations, holiday atmosphere, and level of tutorial engagement. Language, different expectations and a holiday atmosphere were particularly important for international students. When students were asked to identify how things could be done differently in terms of adjusting teaching practice to improve student commitment, students stated that commitment in many instances could not be improved due to other work and family commitments. Nevertheless, interventions to address five key areas were implemented: (a) clearly define required tasks (action: provide weekly tutorial activity sheets that clearly identified activities required to fulfil the curriculum); (b) provide examples (action: provide and discuss past assignments); (c) provide clear

explanation of what is required for tasks (action: provide marking sheets and discuss them in detail); (d) apply Revans' model (Pedler, 2012) L(learning) = P(programmed knowledge) + Q(questioning) (action: run specific tutorial sessions to encourage open discourse; and (e) provide help and feedback (action: follow up students who missed tutorials via email). Students registered appreciably positive responses toward all changes.

However, despite the first cycle's success, it became very apparent that engagement and commitment among students were affected by attitudes toward cross-cultural relationships between domestic and international students. Therefore, the second PALAR cycle specifically set out to implement activities to improve these relationships through building respect and trust in a participative way and to develop ownership through their PALAR teamwork on real-world projects.

Student self-reflection confirmed that Sterling's (2008) characteristics of educational sustainability were strengthened in their cross-cultural relationships by the activities implemented. A greater percentage of domestic students than international students (60% vs 40%) found the 'forced-fun, getting-to-know you' activities—ice breakers, jigsaw puzzles, name tags—most helpful. In contrast, more international students than domestic students (57% vs 43%) found the group presentations that demanded forced collaboration and creativity more engaging. However, this activity proved very successful for both the domestic and international students in terms of participation and ownership, from which grew relationships of respect and trust, which in turn contributed to educational sustainability. The success of engagement activities that encouraged creativity reinforces McGowan's (2012) findings on the importance of fostering student creativity. These creative activities also provided opportunities for international students to informally develop their language skills with the support of native English speakers, which addresses the findings of Arkoudis et al. (2010); these researchers found different levels of English language

proficiency interfered with effective interactions between domestic and international students.

The first PALAR cycle began with the objective of improving my professional pedagogical skills. Over the two cycles I experienced personal transformation; my confidence levels soared with the substantial increases in my SFT scores. The SFT scores and students' comments became a personal inspiration and returned enthusiasm to my teaching. I was also motivated to share my success at university teaching and learning seminars and at national conferences. A second dimension of personal growth also emerged through the PALAR reflection processes, deeply changing my perspectives toward teaching and enabling me to move from academic practice to praxis (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). In terms of the PALAR process, I 'experience[d] the problem' (low teaching scores and lack of student commitment); I was then involved in defining the problem and identifying how to solve the problem (questioning my students and my peers), and in 'implementing the solutions' (developing a toolbox of interventions), as recommended by Zuber-Skerritt (2009). The flexibility afforded by the two-cycle PALAR process supported the ongoing sustainability of both the academic and student educational outcomes.

The contributions made by these two PALAR cycles illustrate the successful consequences of blending the phases of Revans' traditional, business-based action learning model (Pedler, 2012) with the action-research cyclical progression of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Applying the questioning formula of Revans ( $L = P + Q$ ) enabled the students to question their peers and their clients, while I was able to question and learn to adjust my teaching accordingly. In the second cycle I used the process of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to identify unresolved issues from the first PALAR cycle for resolution in the second cycle. My use of students' self-reflection on their PALAR cycle activities was key to understanding the underlying issues and confirmed the benefits of Revans' (1980) action learning ideals. This project enabled both the

academic (me) and students as ‘real people [to] tackle real problems in real time’ and to learn ‘from and with each other’ (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). The gains arose in large part because, as Zuber-Skerritt (2002) suggests, PALAR is about having a vested interest in the outcomes of your actions.

## Conclusion

The combination of Revans’ action learning formula (Pedler, 2012) with Kemmis & McTaggart’s (1988) action research cycles in these two PALAR cycles has demonstrably contributed to both student and academic achievements. My students experienced enhanced communication, engagement, participation and ownership. These changes have contributed to building cross-cultural peer relationships of respect and trust between domestic and international third-year business students and, in turn, sustainable educational outcomes. Improved engagement and participation was demonstrated in both the student self-reflections and the students’ comments in the formal SFT survey. The substantial consecutive increases in my SFT scores over the two cycles (8% and 12%) further confirm the success of the project, and improved my morale, provided a welcome boost to my confidence and moved my teaching from practice to praxis.

Future research could examine how the contributions of peer support and social networking might better contribute to more rapid development of relationships between domestic and international students. This is particularly important for international students, who have only a small window of opportunity to build these relationships.

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## Acknowledgements

Dr Cameron acknowledges Dr Bill Allen for reintroducing her to action research and action learning as his student in the Graduate

Certificate of Education (Professional Learning), and for his support and encouragement in the development of this paper. She also acknowledges support from Dr. Maria Raciti for her support in the area of Learning and Teaching. She also gratefully acknowledges grant support provided by the Centre for Support and Advancement of Learning and Teaching at the University of the Sunshine Coast, which made this project possible.

## **About the Authors**

**Dr Leone Cameron**, GCertEd BBus MB PhD, is a lecturer in International Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Leone came to USC after a career at both Southern Cross University and Monash University where she has lectured in both Management and Marketing. She has an intense interest in the international student study experiences and is currently working on an action research project integrating social media and student network support. In addition to her academic positions, Leone has been the director of two of her own businesses and has worked in both the public and private sectors in Australia and overseas.

**Dr Bill Allen**, GCertEd MEdMgt EdD, is on staff at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He was a high school teacher for 28 years in England and in Western Australia. He is involved in teacher education in the Graduate Diploma and undergraduate programs at USC, and in the professional development of practitioners in postgraduate programs. He supervises doctoral students in a range of areas, with a particular interest in teacher education in developing countries. He has published in the areas of school history, school operations, assessment and high school–university transition. He is involved in school education in Indonesia leading courses in the development of teachers and leaders.

# Practitioner reflection

## Growing our knowledge, improving our practice - reflecting on how doing participatory action research over a period of time shifts the way you understand and do the work

Michelle Parker

### Abstract

*This article describes and reflects on the experience of the Reconnect East Arnhem early intervention service in using participatory action research (PAR). Written by a manager the article explores the contribution PAR has made to the development of relationships and services at the local level. The process of engaging with the community in exploring the question "What would it take to better support young people using alcohol and other drugs?" is outlined and reflected on. The experience of this service is that participatory action research builds a shared common interest and understanding which that is highly valuable for human services in their work with communities.*

**Keywords:** *Participatory action research, early intervention, youth homelessness, AOD practice*

We all like to celebrate little wins for clients, their families, communities and services, when we get a group of people talking with excitement about what's happening we want to keep this

process going and find out more. Staff come back from a meeting with a school and some young people, and there's a buzz about the office that you can't help but be drawn into. People are talking a million miles an hour with excitement and possibilities. What can we do with this energy? Why is it that people are so energised, angry, or driven about the topic at hand? What is happening that is creating such a buzz? What does this mean? What are they wanting to make better? What can we do to find out more? What do we want to try? All of these are questions point to the beginning of a PAR process. People have hunches about what might be happening and it's important to discuss these further.

When harnessed in this way, PAR starts with a strong purpose and it's important to allow enough space for the discussion to really find out what it is that should be explored. This paper will use these questions in an Observe-Reflect-Plan-Act cycle to look at how PAR has helped the Reconnect services at Anglicare NT, staff and community grow a shared understanding of particular issues. It will explore how PAR can influence individual workers, communities and clients, even if in small ways.

## **Background**

Action research has been embedded in funding agreements for the Australian government's Reconnect program since the days of the Youth Homelessness Pilot Projects in 1996 (Crane 2006). The Prime Minister's Youth Homelessness Task Force developed a framework for early intervention into youth homelessness in 1996 (Department of Family and Community Services 1998). From the Task Force the Youth Homelessness Pilot Projects were developed, 26 services around Australia, working to support young people early in their experience of homelessness. In order to support the work of services and improve the practise of the services in a responsive and ongoing manner, PAR was used as a tool for ongoing service development, review and evaluation, and specifically an opportunity to engage young people, their families and communities in the process of addressing homelessness in the

local context. Following on from the pilot project, Reconnect was developed as an ongoing program and eventually over 100 services were funded nationally. Anglicare NT conducted one of the pilot projects and was later funded to deliver Reconnect services in Darwin, Palmerston & Rural, and East Arnhem. The Reconnect program continues to operate in the homelessness sector supporting young people and families to prevent homelessness prior to or shortly after early home leaving. Participatory action research has been found to contribute to developing best practice in Reconnect and continues to be a process to improve outcomes for clients and service users (RPR Consulting 2003; Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2011). This paper draws largely on the experience of the Reconnect East Arnhem service, and that of the author who has been directly involved in supporting the use of PAR across the Reconnect services since the late 1990s. It explores the types of things that get people excited about PAR, the depth of relationships that may be built through the process, the individual, service and community growth through the process and the possibilities and opportunities that sometimes emerge from the processes. The article will use examples from Reconnect East Arnhem, which contribute to the overarching question, “What would it take to better support young people using alcohol and other drugs?”

## **Our practice experience**

Our experience of PAR at Anglicare NT is varied. PAR at times energises, frightens and excites people, as they realise how much they want to know about a particular issue, how little they really know about it and how many things they can do to find out how to do things better. We have found it builds on learnings of previous action research cycles and encourages individual experiential learning embedded in respectful, strength based processes. Participatory action research values the stories that mould and shape our services, our clients and our workers and keeps us humble about the achievements of the services.

There have been a number of PAR cycles related to alcohol and other drug use conducted through Reconnect East Arnhem, with each cycle contributing to a broader body of knowledge in the service and the community. This broader body of knowledge may be framed as a macro question, which may be a broad question aimed at improving the outcomes for those we aim to assist. Micro questions, or more targeted questions, are then created to be more specific about what it is we want to try. These micro questions are derived from having a very clear and shared understanding about what we want to do something about. Micro questions in Reconnect East Arnhem related to young people reducing their intake of alcohol and other drugs, not being intoxicated when going to school, choosing healthier options, being more informed about the consequences of using drugs and alcohol, staying safe when intoxicated, sniffing, being in control of their use, attending school, supporting families, delivering programs and improving programs. Each one of the questions builds on the knowledge garnered from former questions, and grows the understanding of individual workers, young people themselves and communities involved.

*What would it take to support young people using alcohol?* is a question that has been a focus in the Reconnect East Arnhem. Questions related to young people taking drugs and consuming alcohol make a regular appearance in the Reconnect East Arnhem service, Reconnect Darwin and Palmerston/Rural. Questions relate to young people reducing their intake, not being intoxicated when going to school, choosing healthier options, being more informed about the consequences of their use, staying safe when intoxicated, sniffing, being in control of their use, attending school, supporting families, delivering and improving programs. Each one of the questions builds on the knowledge garnered from former questions, and grows the understanding of given workers, community members involved in different questions, young people themselves and communities involved. Prior to these questions being asked by our service, many fabulous people, local and visitors, have done great work in addressing local issues in

collaboration with local people, we acknowledge that their work laid the foundation for the following questions.

### **What gets us started on a question?**

We have found that action research assists us to look at the hunches we sometimes get but may not otherwise think we have the time to explore (Crane & O'Regan 2010). Rather than trying something different without really working out what is working and what is not, PAR provides us with a framework to engage stakeholders in the process of determining what would make a particular situation better, or how we can address a particular concern or issue. It allows us to explore why it is that people are so energised, angry or driven about the topic at hand. As suggested in the participatory action research manual produced from the experience of Reconnect services called '*On PAR*' (Crane and O'Regan 2010) we commenced our action research cycle by with 'observe'.

### **What is happening? Observe.**

In 2005 a teacher approached a worker with a hunch about what was happening with a particular group of young people (predominantly young men) at the school. Attendance was dropping and there were reports of illicit substance use and families were concerned. A number of people were brought together to discuss what was happening, what it meant for the community and what could be done. The group wanted young people to be better informed about what the drugs and alcohol were doing to their bodies and their families, wanted young people to make healthier choices and wanted them to remain engaged or re-engage with school and family but 'telling them off' wasn't working. The school wanted young people to attend school and participate, rather than coming to school for the air conditioning. Our service wanted to know how to best support these young people in a culturally appropriate manner, who could support them to address their drug use, and what was best practice in alcohol and other drug education and support. It was

possible to start exploring 10 questions after the first meeting without even talking with the young people themselves, however one question needed to be chosen so as to make some progress on at least one of the questions. The question chosen was *“What would it take for this group of young people to engage in drug and alcohol education?”*

### **What does this mean? Reflect**

A part of each question asks what else we need to find out in pursuing this question? The response to this often includes finding out further information, this situation finding out more about the effects of alcohol and particular illicit substances, talking with young people about what is happening in relation to the question in the local community and what it means to the local community. Individual clients were asked by the service what they would like to know more about in respect of drugs and alcohol and how that would best be delivered. A fact finding mission occurred at this stage and involved many stakeholders and some other people who have information about the question. Mental health and AOD workers were involved, thus providing information about the effects of the substances being used by local young people and what information we could provide.

### **What do we want to try? Plan.**

After much discussion about what was happening and what this meant to community, a plan was approved by the Aboriginal school council to engage the Reconnect service, the local AOD worker and the Aboriginal Mental Health Worker to co-deliver workshops within the school. The workshops would be fun, informative and in English and local Aboriginal languages.

### **Putting the plan into action, Act.**

The Reconnect workers, together with the Mental Health worker, developed session plans and invited the Alcohol and other Drugs workers to deliver certain aspects of the session. Some of the

challenges faced and strategies put in place to mitigate the challenges are detailed below in Table 1.

Table 1 Challenges and strategies in planning

Challenges	Strategies
Confidentiality, where young people would raise other young people as examples	Boundaries and group rules put in places about what could be spoken about
Small groups some days	Make sure there was something continuous to keep people at school, ensure there were only 2 facilitators so as not to have too many adults in the room.
Death of a prominent community member, meaning many young people did not attend school due to sorry business.	Postpone the session to the following week and respect cultural protocols.

## What happened?

Some young people attended each of the workshop sessions, we tend to believe that young people vote with their feet and won't return when they know something is on that they don't like, therefore it was good to have a number of young people remain engaged with the workshop sessions. Participants responded to feedback interviews and focus groups to improve sessions and ask further questions. Further learnings were identified by all, including the importance of having an elder available for the workshops, the complexities of talking about such topics in a small community where everyone knows who is doing what and the importance of using people the young people already have a connection with. Confidentiality remains a challenge to discuss in a small community where everyone has the responsibility for looking after each other. It is regularly discussed in a community

context to ensure it makes sense to the communities we're working with.

As always with PAR processes, further questions were raised such as:

- What would it take to support the families of young people using drugs and alcohol?
- How to provide information using local resources?
- How to create local resources in local languages?
- What would it take to have a unified response to young people attending school who have been using overnight?
- How to get more funding for more programs to address this topic?

## **Another cycle begins**

An opportunity became available to apply for a small amount of money to provide drug and alcohol education in the school. Anglicare NT worked with the school to apply for the grant using information and learnings gathered from the previous PAR question. The application was to provide workshops in the school that contributed to resource development as chosen by the students, thus starting the question, *What would it take to develop local resources?* We were successful in the tender process and young people wanted to produce a short film. The process was facilitated by Reconnect with strong support from the school staff. The film showed a young man having options about what he would do for the night. One choice was to go out and drink a lot and end up fighting. The other choice showed the young man having a few 'cans' (stubbies) of beer and going home, still getting up to go to work the next day. Further information was gathered from this project in an action research cycle to inform our questions about drug and alcohol education.

### **... and another cycle begins**

Following this project, another funding opportunity was seized, and we were supported to apply for the funding by the local schools, the education department and local services and the community. Utilising information gathered from the first two PAR cycles, the body of evidence of the need for the project had grown. Other sources of evidence and data were required to support the application, however there was a growing number of people, workers, community members and young people with a growing knowledge and understanding to provide support to the application. A new project Nungu Malatjarnarawu - Your Choice, was funded for 18 months. The project plan was based along the lines of the questions that had emerged from earlier PAR. Looking at supporting families in relation to drugs and alcohol, supporting young people through school and developing support for older young people who were disengaged from school.

### **Practice insights**

#### **Do we need to action research questions about alcohol and other drugs if we've done them before?**

Given the context changes, the types of drugs, the young people who are doing the drugs, the methods they're using to obtain and take drugs, and their families' responses, it's important that new workers develop and undertake their own questions and work on questions that are relevant to the time and the community context. This doesn't mean that previous inquiry processes are not relevant, but it may mean that they don't fit entirely. Communities need the opportunity to contribute to the changed environment and situation, sharing their concerns and their expertise in how to deal with the issue at hand. Information gathered from previous questions may be useful in different areas but need updating. More recently a group of young women were identified as the 'at risk' group and workers utilised the PAR process to engage with them and their families. Some previous information was useful, however there were many new things to learn and new people to contribute.

This has proven very valuable for all involved as they have become more involved in the service and the community.

### **PAR as a case level practice process**

Participatory action research is used a lot during case discussions in Reconnect East Arnhem, using the cycle to look at ... What is happening? What does this mean for this client? What does this mean for his/her family? What would the client like to try? What would things look like if things were being done differently? How are we going to actually do that? How long are we going to do that for? When this process is used for clients with similar issues, particular patterns emerge about what is happening for a particular group, about responses in the community to particular issues, about protocols we should be following to address particular challenges. We can start to see what is working for particular clients and try similar processes or ideas with different clients. It's a learning tool for staff working directly with the client and those participating in case discussions. When used with clients the process helps identify what they would like to try and what they would like to see happen for them. It helps to see possibilities and build on achievements. If something hasn't quite worked, but worked a little bit it allows space to change the plan, to refine it and try it a little different this time, or take the wins from the previous cycle and build on those wins. Fraser, D., Gehan, K. & Mills, A. (2003) discuss the importance of the strengths approach in action research to build on the great things that families are doing and keep these going in what are sometimes very difficult situations. Fraser, D., Gehan, K. & Mills, A. (2003) discuss how important this is when working with Indigenous families and communities who are often seen to have problems rather than strengths.

### **The breadth of relationships: Who is impacted**

Over 20 staff of Anglicare NT have been directly involved in PAR projects about alcohol and other drugs since 2003 in East Arnhem alone. Though some staff have not worked there for long, others

have built understanding, knowledge and connections with the local community over a long period of time, often with the assistance of a PAR process. Some staff have been local and others from interstate. More than 60 local Aboriginal people (including 40 young people) have been involved in different stages of PAR processes, bringing their knowledge of what is happening, their knowledge of the topic and learning some new information about new and emerging drug and alcohol issues in the local area. Being involved in these projects has been one of the aspects of growing the knowledge and understanding of workers and the community alike, knowledge which has been used in a variety of ways, including for the further exploration of questions and projects, seeking funding for projects, employment, inspiration and contributing to other forums about alcohol and other drugs. So while it has been a learning process for our service and the staff within it, the reach has been further than this.

Some of the learnings from PAR processes in East Arnhem have been transferable to other areas of the service and included in new projects. Some are specific to the local area and no longer relevant as the context has changed, but what remains the same is that the PAR process supported the service to grow relationships, individual workers to improve their local knowledge and knowledge about drugs and alcohol, and those close to the process to grow their knowledge about both drugs and alcohol and the service system.

A further 40 service providers (including teachers, Centrelink workers, alcohol and other drug staff, mental health, child protection officers, women's services, sport & recreation & policy workers) in the local area have been involved in developing and exploring questions, building their understanding and sharing information they have. People have come in at different levels and grown their knowledge and understanding in different ways, whether that be learning about local processes, developing relationships through the process, or learning about issue specific information. Other staff at Anglicare NT beyond East Arnhem who

have heard about or been in discussions about these projects have also learnt more, which further shares the information and builds an understanding across the broader agency about how to best work in this particular community or on this topic.

## Conclusion

Our experience has been that participatory action research builds a shared understanding and creates a point of common interest and understanding that is highly valuable when working in human services. PAR creates a point of trust with local communities as staff aren't coming in as the experts, but rather as interested people, curious about local issues and how to improve the service. This curiosity and interest in the issue being explored is imperative to engaging people in the process. Participatory action research is a process that supports the sharing of information and knowledge, seeks to celebrate the strengths and create local answers and solutions to questions we often face as youth, family and community workers. Participatory action research supports the growth of services and the community to respond to local concerns, and can be a lot of fun to be involved with.

## Acknowledgements

Anglicare NT acknowledges the traditional owners, the Rirratjingu and Gumatj people of North East Arnhem land on whose land we work, and we pay respects to the history, living culture and the elders past and present of this region.

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## **About the author**

Michelle Parker is Operations Manager, Youth Early Intervention, Support & Development Initiatives, Anglicare NT, which has its head office in Darwin, Australia. Michelle has been supporting the use of participatory action research in front line youth services for the last 15 years.

## Book Review

# **Learning and Development for a Better World: Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development**

Review by Frank Thompson

**Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt and Richard Teare, *Learning and Development for a Better World: Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development*, published by Sense Publishers.**

Having just read this manuscript, I hope sincerely it is soon to be a book that reaches far and wide. It offers an exciting new understanding of, and approach to, 'education' through lessons and ideas about lifelong action learning and development in communities of great need. In this way it makes a timely and valuable contribution to our damaged and divided global community that needs the local knowledge that has long been excluded from formal education. This work draws particularly from the authors' experiences in contexts of deep poverty, where I believe our best response as 'aid workers' is to work collaboratively with local people to develop local knowledge and learning for self-sustaining futures. Such an approach is precisely what these authors set out to explain. I believe they do so very effectively.

As an educator/trainer and a dad, I am keen to ensure that mainstream education meets the needs of our children, beyond just the three Rs. I sadly recall two high-school friends who in the late 1970s ended their lives not long after completing high-school,

## Lifelong Action Learning for Community Development

*Learning and Development for a Better World*

**Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt**

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Brisbane, Australia

and

**Richard Teare**

Richard Teare, Brighton, Brighton, UK

This book explores and demonstrates how indigenous communities – built on traditional knowledge, culture and language – can be extended and strengthened by (1) the new, integrative methodology of Lifelong Action Learning (LAL), and (2) new approaches to learning and development as exemplified by the system of GULL (Global University for Lifelong Learning). The GULL system harnesses the potential of people to bring about positive change together, characterized by self-reliance, financial independence, and cascading learning and benefits to others. It is a self-directed and self-sustainable process of learning and growth. The case studies in this book provide evidence that even the most economically very poor communities can achieve breakthroughs that bring with them many benefits (personal, professionally and for the community).

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equipped with the three Rs but not with learning for the world. There is ample evidence that formal education institutions in many parts of the world continue to miss the mark in equipping students with the capacity for lifelong learning to live well for the rest of their lives. *Learning and Development for a Better World* is not just a

powerful reminder of this. More importantly, it presents clear discussion of how to do so in practice and why to do so conceptually.

As a development practitioner, I have found myself in the middle of training courses thinking 'I understand what I'm being taught – but I have no idea how I'll be able to apply it back in the office – or out in the field'. I have observed this situation continually in the cross-cultural training context. I have struggled to work out where to start to implement training courses in many complex development situations. When working in a community that is at war with itself – where does one begin? Now I have an answer.

The genius of *Learning and Development for a Better World* is its simplicity. It provides a sound approach to addressing the holes in our mainstream approaches to education, training, development and in living together in communities. It does this through providing a new understanding of 'lifelong action learning' and how to achieve it through proactively cultivating and passing on local knowledge. By effectively bringing together proven methodologies/approaches – AL/AR, community development, cross-cultural theories and lifelong learning – this work provides a clear way forward for development that has two distinctive strengths. It is self sustaining – enabling real progress that will not fall over once interventions stop – and it is self developing – unlocking human potential to deal with the complex and turbulent C21.

This work applies sound development principles based on an all too often overlooked fact: successful development programs cannot be imposed. These programs need to begin with a development agency addressing actual needs identified by local individuals and groups. These programs need to be continued by equipping these people with the ability and will to sustain outcomes on the ground themselves.

Many times I have lamented approaches to training in complex development situations. In these instances, the training

organisation a) delivers training in the community but there are no support systems or community structures that enable trainees to apply new skills, or worse still b) removes trainees from their community for training that has no relevance to their situation. The latter is often undertaken on national scales – sometimes leaving a tinderbox of frustrated people. The approach presented in this book is ‘complementary’ to the better aspects of mainstream education/training.

The book therefore makes a concise and valuable contribution to pedagogical literature. It is universally applicable in education institutions, communities, organisations of all kinds and particularly in the international development cooperation sphere. The flexible approach outlined in the book can be adopted by development practitioners across the world in cross-cultural development situations. Most importantly, it does not require huge financial aid and instead seeks to create, and build upon, local knowledge that is well suited to local conditions.

I applaud the work’s internal consistency; the authors truly practice what they preach on and off the page. I illustrate with two clear examples: holistic development and action. The authors do not focus merely on technical skills but holistically appreciate good health, wellbeing and happiness – the gross personal happiness paradigm overlooked to our detriment in the dominant economic paradigm now steering our globalised world. The authors couple a clear step-by-step methodology that is easy to put into practice (even for people new to action approaches) with clear examples of actual practice and references for useful web-based videos – of and for action. The authors uphold holistic development and action at every turn of their practice and thinking about ‘sustainable development’.

In sum, I find the integration of conceptual and practical knowledge in this book highly valuable. I believe this book has the potential to generate transformational change in approaches to dealing with complex human problems. I very much hope it becomes part of the groundswell of thought about how to deal with the complex problems of humanity that the current dominant paradigms are ill equipped to deal with.

Frank Thompson, PhD in management of international development programs, has worked in development for more than 15 years in government, NGOs and as a consultant. He currently delivers programs in Africa.

[frank\\_thompson@ausaid.gov.au](mailto:frank_thompson@ausaid.gov.au) or [ftthompsonassociates@yahoo.com.au](mailto:ftthompsonassociates@yahoo.com.au)

Pretoria, 6 June 2013

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<p><b>Are you eligible for a concessional membership fee?</b> If you are a student, pensioner or individual earning less than \$AU 20,000 per annum then you can apply for the concessional membership fee.</p> <p><b>Do you belong to an organisation that is an Organisational Member of ALARA Inc?</b> If you are a member of such an organisation, you can apply for the reduced membership fee. If you are uncertain if your organisation is an Organisational Member, please pay the full fee and enter "Uncertain" in the Organisation's Name box below. We will advise you if a discount is available and refund the difference.</p>		
<b>Annual Membership Fees</b> (Please select one type of membership)		
<input type="checkbox"/> \$AU 145.00 Full membership fee		
<input type="checkbox"/> \$AU 95.00 Concessional membership fee (see above)		
<input type="checkbox"/> \$AU 72.50 Reduced membership fee, as I belong to an Organisational Member of ALARA. Organisation's Name:		
<p><i>By submitting this membership form, I acknowledge that I have read, understood and accept ALARA's Privacy Policy (<a href="http://www.alara.net.au/privacy">http://www.alara.net.au/privacy</a>)</i></p>		
<p>We offer a range of payment options. Details are provided on the Tax Invoice that we will send to you on receipt of your membership application</p>		   
<p><b>Remember: If you want to join and pay online, just go to <a href="http://www.alara.net.au/alara_payments">http://www.alara.net.au/alara_payments</a></b> Alternatively, please return the completed form to us:</p>		
<b>By post to:</b>	PO Box 1748 TOOWONG Queensland 4066 AUSTRALIA	
<b>By FAX to:</b>	+ 61 (7) 3342 1669	
<b>BY email to:</b>	<a href="mailto:finance@alara.net.au">finance@alara.net.au</a>	

ALARA will email your invoice within 2 working days and normally process memberships 5 working days after receiving payment. You will receive an email confirming activation of your account, and details on how you can access website functions.

Please see ALARA's web site [www.alara.net.au](http://www.alara.net.au) for an organisational membership application form.

*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.*