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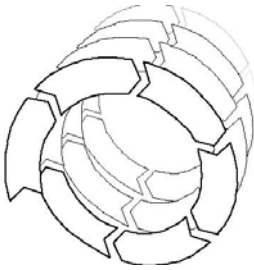
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Editorial

The *Action Learning and Action Research Journal* frequently publishes articles on a wide variety of topics, and this issue is no exception. As two groups, however, these five articles have similarities. The authors of the first three articles have written a collaborative description of their action research projects. The second and third teams are early in those projects, while the first team has been engaged on the project for many years. The first two discuss the development of the relationship of the team within an action research environment, while the third describes future actions.

The final two articles are by a single author and a pair of authors exploring areas not usually associated with action research. The first discusses how aesthetics can enhance practitioner's action research work, and the second uses insider action research to explore the impact of digital marketing on purchaser intention.

The first article is by a group of Organisation Development & Design (OD&D) practitioners working on a three-year piece of action research (AR) into the experience of working across the UK Civil Service. Wiggins, Norgate, Parker, Barker and Grieve's collaboratively written account is *Shifting culture and improving OD practice in a hierarchical context: The power of the action research question 'What can I and can't I do?'* Their action research project was amid a program to develop the organisational culture of the UK Civil Service – a significant undertaking in its own right. In developing their research question, they explored the concepts of culture and raised several questions, such "What are individuals believing they can or cannot do when they 'mute'?" (p. 17). The authors relate their actions in the action research cycle as they worked with senior leaders to change the way in which the Civil Service conducted meetings, with the intent to make them more of a conversation. Besides working as a group with the senior leaders

and as their own reflection group, they wrote and shared self-reflections, and responded to three or four questions before several meetings. These reflections allowed the group to track their individual and collective experiences.

Besides this self- and group development, the group explored many aspects about meetings, including the way in which a meeting's tone is set by the invitation to attend, the place of meeting and the personal energy in the meeting. Their action research "shows the possibility of surfacing the underlying assumptions about beliefs and values" (p. 26) often not found in other models of culture. They also identified several practical implications of their research, including the value of the question "what can I and can't I do" to question their own and others' assumptions, and that multiple gestures are required to shift a meeting to a conversation.

The second article is also from a group of action researchers who have worked collaboratively to prepare *Collaborative writing as action research: A story in the making*. Austin, Bessemer, Goff, Hill, Orr and Vaartjes examine the experience of collaborative writing with relevance to action research in a project that is a research inquiry into the role of action research publications in manifesting action research. The paper "is a reflexive narrative, describing our emerging praxis, as we engage together in the early stages of the research project" (p. 37). The group found that they "move[d] between writing, critical inquiry, review and adjustment to our thinking and process to inform the next stage of work, [and they]… manifest multiple micro cycles of action research" (p. 39). As the authors worked, they sought a delicate balance between themselves as individuals, the team and the purpose for which they had joined (or, the *I*, the *We* and the *It*). In their discussions, the authors had to surface and explore a wide range of matters – the usual team development processes, including governance when there is no leader, shared (or not) world views and beliefs, and trust in the skill and openness of fellow members of the team. An obvious benefit is the breadth of their collective experiences, knowledge and libraries. They also had to face the challenge of

writing about doing and reflecting while not theorising too much – and trying to define 'too much.'

The authors found that by working on this article, they could reflect on their own practices – whether they did work collaboratively and in which way, and whether they did speak from a collective voice. They "experienced inherent tensions between manifesting a methodology that is inclusive, collaborative and empowering and a sense of comfort with 'our own way of knowing and doing.' "(p. 56).

The next article is *Unseen students: Exploring rural young adults' college and career decision-making experiences through action research approaches*. The authors, Batch, Douglas, Roth, Allen, Nakonechnyi and Roberts, describe their actions in an on-going research project.

The authors point out that rural students in USA are often at a disadvantage because incentives and resource distribution neglect those in rural settings wishing to gain qualifications. This situation would seem to me to be potentially true in any country. The researchers looked at the factors influencing the decisions of, and the barriers face by, rural young adults. They choose a participatory action research approach to give them a better understanding of how they could address the problem in their local context. They surveyed and interviewed students, involving some of them as co-researchers. The data gathered identified a number of barriers and potential ways to improve rural young adults' career decision-making. This data also helped in the formation of a range of action items aimed at addressing the key problems identified, some of which the team had begun to implement. For example,

> one student co-researcher wanted to start a parent information initiative. This student is leading the creation of informative videos and information packets to send to parents seeking to help their kids through the college application and financial aid process (p. 85).

Another student co-researcher "has been working with our app development team to implement some of his ideas on how to make it easier for students to connect with their peers" (p. 85). The team

plan for additional iterations of the action research cycle to follow the full implementation of these actions. Next steps include sharing the results with their institution and collaborating with rural high schools in the area.

The fourth article is *Aesthetics and participatory research: Enriching the quality of our epistemology*, in which author Susan Goff proposes "that "aesthetics" are essential to good participatory practice because of the quality of power that they generate through an aesthetic appreciation and construction of participation" (p. 95). She also contends that aesthetic "sensitivity is a precursor to any other form of recognition and meaning making" (p. 96) as our physical and cognitive sensing of anything is firstly aesthetic in nature. She indicates that aesthetics provides a different lens through which to view the nature of action research, a different body in which we can explore how we know participatory approaches manifest, and a different arena where there is a 'resonance' between the fields of action research and aesthetics. She explores the subject in a way that allows the reader to "experience moments of indeterminacy not always explaining my sequences as an invitation to you, the reader, to be the final author of this piece" (p. 98).

Goff discusses aesthetic muteness or the separation of aesthetics from formal and informal ways of knowing, highlighting that this separation can make us less able to hear, see, feel and think in other ways. She states that aesthetics is at work in first-person, second-person and third-person participatory research practice and proposes that "aesthetics may be the origin of participation, and recursively, participation that of aesthetics" (p. 122). Importantly, "[a]ction research is perhaps the only practice that can radically question its ontological and epistemological traditions in service to the present" (p. 119). By overcoming aesthetic muteness, practitioners will have a greater appreciative engagement of humanity, knowing what would have remained unseen, undervalued or limited by oppressive and dominating epistemologies and ontologies.

Our final article, by Gopee and Shamma, is an exploration of action research in the growing field of digital marketing: *How does digital marketing influence purchase intention? An action researcher reflexive narrative*. Digital marketing is not one usually associated with action research, but the authors believe that situation should change.

The authors state that marketers are fixated on gathering data about purchasing habits, but are oblivious to vital latent information that influences buyers' purchasing intentions. They suggest "a research philosophy that places emphasis on relevance and validity tested in action, rather than one anchored in objectivity and controlled environments" (p. 131), and that action research was a plausible research methodology. Further, they suggest that an action research project from the inside would foster reflexivity among marketers on how they know what they know. This approach takes digital marketing discussions out of the realm of technology (for example, big data, which is historical data) and into design of digital marketing activities that redirect marketing dollars to activities bearing greater influence on predispositions to purchase. The authors propose a value dimension framework, representing broad feelings that influence choice behaviour.

While marketing appears to use scientific research, it lacks precision. Digital "reality is in large part a subjective phenomenon existing in the marketer's mind" (p. 139). Their research uses reflexive questioning to uncover assumptions by marketers and discover how they know what they know. In so doing, the research "moves away from deductive theory-testing methodologies towards an inductive approach contained in reflexivity" (p. 142).

Among the outcomes discovered were the dichotomy between marketers who sometimes used digital and the digital-first marketers who are au fait with digital concepts, and the need to recognise the individuality of consumers. The authors invite "marketing professionals to engage in critical thinking with their self and other stakeholders, instead of taking data at face value" (p. 150).

The authors finish their article by asking whether digital marketing is too positivist for action research and suggesting future directions for action research in digital marketing.

This issue is the last with Professor Mishack Gumbo as Managing Editor. Professor Gumbo received an invitation to edit a journal connected to his university. The ALAR Association Board thanks him for his work over the last two years and wishes him all the best for the future. The next issue of the *ALAR Journal* will introduce the new Managing Editor.

Shifting culture and improving OD practice in a hierarchical context: The power of the action research question 'What can I and can't I do?'

Liz Wiggins, Carolyn Norgate, Carolyn Parker, Janet Barker and Keith Grieve

Abstract

This study, part of a three-year Action Research (AR) project exploring shifting culture in the UK Civil Service, provides a collective account, collaboratively written, of learning from exploring micro level moves to create the conditions for conversations rather than meetings. A fruitful line of inquiry emerged from the seemingly simple question of 'what can I and can't I do around here,' enabling the surfacing of assumptions, often viewed as inaccessible in layered models of culture. Disciplined cycles of action and reflection gave rise to 'actionable knowledge' (Coghlan, 2011), highlighting the thoughtfulness involved in shifting stuck patterns (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 2011) constituting culture (Stacey, 2011).

Key words: Culture change, meeting norms, conversational spaces, sustaining action research

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What is known about the topic?

Layer models of culture suggest that assumptions, a key theoretical construct, are so deep seated and 'unreachable' in nature, they often prevent change.

What does this paper add?

This paper demonstrates the power of the seemingly simple question 'what can I and can't I do' to unearth individuals' cultural assumptions, suggesting that assumptions do not have to remain unknown. The paper also demonstrates how the question enhanced OD practice and enabled insider researchers to consider, and then make in practice, different micro gestures which shifted what were previously seen as meetings into conversations.

Who will benefit from its content?

OD professionals and academics interested in the theory and practice of culture change, and especially what it takes to shift meeting culture; Action researchers interested in how to sustain the practice of AR in an organizational setting over time.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

An example of how to learn and sustain AR over a long period of time, including writing collaboratively with ensuing personal and organizational benefits. The paper also emphasizes the importance of an AR group to sustain inquiry, courage and tenacity.

Introduction

The authors once met in a funky café with seats fixed tight up against the table. As one of us sat down, a hand went up to stop the Civil Service lanyard hitting the table. An instinctive but superfluous gesture as we weren't wearing lanyards and we weren't in the office! This small incident exemplifies the idea that culture is carried around with us, unthinkingly shaping our gestures and responses (Stacey, 2011) unless we slow down, pause and become curious about our own internal assumptions. This account, inevitably partial and partisan, comprises moments highlighting the power of a question to shape and challenge individuals' assumptions about what is possible or not, in particular situations at specific moments in time, given interpretations of prevailing norms we might describe as culture. It is also a story of how the question enhanced OD practice.

The context is highly specific in terms of place and time. In March 2016, a group of Organisation Development & Design (OD&D) practitioners started a 3-year piece of action research (AR) into the experience of working across the UK Civil Service during a particularly tumultuous time: the UK referendum to exit the EU, 3 prime ministers, a series of terror attacks in 2017 and ongoing EU exit preparations. However, we believe our account will be relevant to others in organizations where formality and positional power (French and Raven, 1959) are key features of culture.

After briefly sharing more about the research context, we explore different theoretical perspectives on culture and the nature of dialogue, situating these in the OD literature. Consideration of AR as our chosen method is followed by an account of what happened, including the emergence of the research question, and the work done by the five of us. We conclude with an examination of both the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, as well as a review of the limitations of this piece of ongoing AR.

Context

By 2016, the UK Civil Service - a federated organisation made up of almost fifty ministerial and non-ministerial departments, as well as hundreds of smaller agencies and arms-length bodies - had steered its way through a programme of government led savings as part of the national austerity programme, following the 2008 global financial crisis. At just under 500,000 staff, it was the smallest it had been since the Second World War. The People Vision was to be a 'humane and high performing' organisation. The ambition to develop the organisation's culture was no light undertaking: the UK Civil Service has existed in its current form, more or less, since the Northcote-Trevalyan Report of 1854. The OD&D specialist partnering service, formed in 2011 specifically to support large-scale and complex organisational change (Garrow, 2013), aims to use an OD informed, people-oriented, collaborative and relational approach to working with its clients (Weisbord, 2012) although much of the Civil Service's change efforts are based on ideas of planned change leading to measurable outcomes.

Researchers from Ashridge Executive Education, part of Hult International Business School, provided support and guidance around Action Research to a group of internal OD consultants, creating a collaborative AR project that began as part of the culture change stream of the Civil Service reform agenda. The initial research question was: *What is it that we can, and cannot, do in the service of enabling a more humane and high performing organisation?* The first person version of this became simplified in use as *'what can I and can't I do?'* in any given situation.

Literature review

Culture

Culture is widely understood to describe 'the way we do things round here' and to capture significant, but often intangible and hard to describe, differences between organizations, that goes beyond size, activity, success, staff morale and ownership. To distinguish between visible and more hidden aspects of culture, metaphors used range from icebergs (Myers, Hulks & Wiggins, 2012) to an onion (Schein, 2010) to trees with roots in different layers of earth (Vanstone, 2010). Observable features such as products, stories, buildings, routines, hierarchy, types of speeches, meeting practices are referred to 'artefacts'. Shared values and beliefs are not immediately evident, but conceptualized as accessible through discussion, observation and reflection. These 'layer' culture models suggest a deeper level of assumptions exist where beliefs *and* values about work, organizations, relationships, people, have become so ingrained they are unrecognised and unseen (Schein, 2010; Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006). This raises a question with both theoretical and practical implications:

- might an exploration of what individuals feel they can and can't do, offer an insight into their assumptions which are aspects of culture that are deemed otherwise inaccessible?

In contrast to theorists who seek to understand the nature of culture, others focus on the dynamics and processes by which

cultures are created, understood and perpetuated by insiders, emphasising the meaning making that occurs between and within individuals. Habermas (1984) also draws attention to the interplay between what he calls the 'life world' and the 'system world', where 'life world' refers to an individual's lived experience, as constituted in relation to groups that form a social system and the 'system world' in which micro behaviours and interactions become regularised through organisational processes and institutional structures. When individuals interact through the system world perspective, their lifeworld experience may be muted or secondary to expectations of position, role or function (Shah, 2001). This raises questions about the nature of this 'muting' process in, for example, very hierarchical organizational cultures like the Civil Service.

- What are individuals believing they can or cannot do when they 'mute'?

- Might an exploration of this question also offer new insight into the vexed question of the dynamics of culture change in practice?

This focus on individual sensemaking resonates with complexity theorists (Stacey, 2011) for whom organising is 'an ongoing self-referencing process of gestures and responses between people' (p. 18). However, individual agency is constrained by existing sensemaking embedded in power relations within an individual's organizational context. Although in principle anything may happen, in practice, individuals are often inhibited by their beliefs about their power in relation to others. This is likely to influence their decisions to speak up or to 'mute'. In doing so they thus confirm to themselves what had been constructed, validating perceptions of the culture and making individuals feel 'I'm right, this is indeed how it is.'

Dialogue and communicative spaces within the OD literature

There is broad agreement that theories informing OD are humanistic in orientation, based on the idea that reality and relationships are socially constructed (Gergen, 2015), and that

understanding organisations involves thinking systemically and relationally (Mirvis, 2014). Instead of being fixers of change problems, OD practitioners might be thought of 'as the convenors of processes of inquiry whose outcomes we did not control that led to answers we did not already have' (Schein, 2015, p. x). This draws attention to both the importance of OD itself as a form of inquiry and the ontological importance of everyday interactions between people, in which conversations and language are viewed as organisation-in-action, situated within processes of continuous change. OD practice thus seeks to create the possibilities for different conversations between people who might not hitherto have talked together on topics that would previously have been undiscussable (Argyris, 1980) by creating conditions for dialogue (Isaacs, 1999).

Methodology – why action research?

Action research (AR) combines action and systematic reflection to try and address a human problem or answer a question. Coleman (2017) suggests it has dual aims:

- to know more about the issues being studied (an inquiry aim) *and*

- to try to change it (an action aim)

AR differs from traditional research methodologies in that it is undertaken by those involved in the situation; it aims to create knowing and awareness throughout the research cycle, rather than seeking an objective, singular finding; and it is about change at an individual and collective human scale, rather than an abstracted, generalisable concept of change.

AR is therefore:

- **Practical**: it is intended to produce 'actionable knowledge' (Coghlan, 2011)

- **Participative**: it is conducted as research *with* people not *on* people

- **Progressive**: it tries to make things *better*, contribute to a more just, equitable and sustainable future

The practical, action aim spoke to a pragmatic need to play into the dominant outcome oriented Civil Service paradigm whilst the participative nature of AR is congruent with the democratic value-base and aspirations of OD (McArdle & Reason, 2006). The ontological and epistemological position of AR also mirrors that of OD, conceptualising people as 'agents' who are capable of articulating their own sense of their worlds as they go about constructing them in relationship with others.

Coleman (2017) describes the three orientations as follows: first person AR (covering me and my experience), second person AR (focusing on 'us' and our peers) and third person inquiry ('them' – the wider organisation or world, the system we are part of) and those we communicate to through publishing.

This paper is an account of the experience of five of us, named here as co-authors, who self-selected from a larger group of 26 Civil Service colleagues and 4 Ashridge external researchers. We five shared a curiosity about how the question *'what can I and can't I do?'* showed up in our role as leaders and in our interactions with senior leaders in the Civil Service. We were curious about what this might tell us about our own assumptions and the gestures required to shift meeting culture into more of a 'communicative space'(Kemmis, 2001). We began meeting three or four times a year from September 2016. Initially we were joined by several other colleagues but the 'we' has been the five of us, identified as authors, from early 2018 until late 2020. We have deliberately chosen to use the pronoun 'we' to describe our collective experience, whilst recognising individual nuances because of personality and role. In the findings section, we use different colours to reflect some of each author's first person AR or their reflections on our collective second person AR in an attempt to recognise, rather than mute, our own individuality.

Action: What we did

In this section, we describe and reflect on the moves we made as a group of individuals, working together to become co-inquirers around the question of what could and couldn't be done in the leadership space within the Civil Service. The four insiders were all actively involved in the deliberate moves described below. The role of the external researcher was i) to convene and host the second person inquiry sessions where the other four could share and reflect on our individual experiences and ii) to provide input and guidance about AR. In doing so, we created our own communicative space (Kemmis, 2001) enabling us to explore what practical moves were needed to shift planned meetings with senior civil servants so that they felt like conversations. Doing this work together gave us courage, confidence and energy to each make counter cultural moves and sustained us as individuals, and the work.

The deliberate moves we made in the first full cycle of AR were as follows:

1.   In early 2017, our first cycle of second person inquiry involved holding inquiry conversations with senior leaders in our own organisations and with senior leaders in other Civil Service organisations via the Civil Service Talent team.

2.   We paid deliberate attention to our language, using the word 'conversations', a linguistic gesture that signalled our intent. In our context, the norm for meetings includes an agenda, an outcome, a sense of there being a "right" answer and power assumed to belong to the convenor of the meeting. We wanted an experience that was participative, exploratory and created a sense of a shared experience where both parties' inputs, observations and experiences were equally valued.

3.   The location for these conversations felt important. Holding them onsite, in meeting rooms might undo the thought and care that we had taken to position them as conversations.

We had also noticed for ourselves how location shifted our interactions and enabled us to connect the lifeworld to the system world in ways that were meaningful. We therefore opted, where possible, to hold our conversations in cafes.

4. We were thus experimenting with different ways to engage senior leaders into becoming co-inquirers with us in the question of what can and can't be done. Some of us used a mind map as a way of capturing reoccurring questions and themes from our small group to stimulate conversation. This allowed the conversation to flow and be emergent rather than being constrained by the tramlines of a set agenda which was the cultural norm.

We have described steps 1 – 4 as one cycle of Action Research, because there was a common intent, amongst the four insiders, to experiment, making deliberate moves to explore how we created the conditions for ourselves, and leaders more senior than us, to engage in dialogue, as equals, on the topic of what can and can't be done as leaders. Within this cycle, there were of course many mini cycles of inquiry as each of the four engaged in first- and second-person AR and then the five of us met together for further second person action research, exploring common themes, naming individual experiences and considering how to adapt and amplify the moves that seemed to make a difference.

After this initial cycle, the focus of our inquiry shifted to exploring the question of what we could or couldn't do in our daily work. Instead of deliberately initiating AR conversations, a defining feature of this phase is that the first person AR, instead of being something *apart from* our day job, became an integral *part of it*. Indeed, we found that the notion of being engaged in a second cycle of AR became less relevant. As we continued to meet as a small group, and share and reflect on this, we realized we were 'living life as inquiry' (Marshall, 1999).

5. In being accepted to present at the 2020 Action Learning Conference in Portsmouth University, UK (postponed) and writing this paper, we have embarked on a new cycle of Action Research where our focus has become not on what we can and can't share, but what might be helpful.

To capture 'the data', we each journaled and shared first person reflections following meeting together. This enabled us to continue the cycles of AR, capturing aspects of these rich conversations that particularly stayed with us. In addition, before meeting we sometimes wrote individual reflections in response to three or four broad questions initiated by the external researcher who then collated the responses into one document which was emailed ahead of the next meeting. This allowed us to keep track of our individual and collective experiences, formed part of our check-in (Isaacs, 1999) when we met and the source for further second person inquiry. On two occasions, we recorded and transcribed our collective conversations.

Findings: Reflections, links to theory and practical actionable insights

Over time, organisational structures and practices can develop which mean the system world dominates and mutes the lifeworld (Shah, 2001), creating a stuck pattern (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 2011). In this section, we share the range of small moves made deliberately and choicefully (Wiggins & Hunter, 2016) that challenged the dominant cultural norms of the Civil Service. These micro gestures offered the potential to create more of a 'communicative space' (Kemmis, 2001) with the intention, and hope, of encouraging some humanity, the personal, the conversational to re-emerge. They are examples of gestures where, as co-inquirers, and leaders ourselves, we had a desire to be braver about what we could and couldn't do in the face of powerful unspoken cultural norms (Lukes, 1990) and our own assumptions of what would and wouldn't be expected by others. These gestures can be seen as leadership moves, in addition to being part of our second person AR.

As mentioned earlier, in an attempt to not mute our own individuality, we use different colours to reflect some of each author's first person AR or their reflections on our collective second person AR.

Invitation and starting well

Meeting requests are generally viewed as transactional, stating time, place, subject, attendees, perhaps an agenda. A core premise of OD is that 'first steps are fateful' (Wiggins & Hunter, 2016). If the invitation is formal, in tone and content, it is a gesture (Stacey, 2011) that recreates normal expectations. Framing such communication as an invitation to a conversation positions the leader (us) as a host who is convening rather than commanding attendance (Binney, Wilke & Williams, 2001). It is also counter cultural, using language from the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984). It thus invites a potentially different response from the other.

 We noticed that naming aloud our intention to have a different kind of conversation was both a helpful gesture for us and a reminder for others.

> *'Foregrounding and verbalising your thoughts can invite others to do the same. This way can and can't is individually situated, and it is co-created.'*

> *'When I myself feel more 'can't' than 'can'. ... I will now grant myself "permission" by prefacing what I say with a verbal acknowledgement that I am having difficulty expressing myself …. This enables me to be more present, more curious and more courageous in my interactions and to bring more of myself to my work.'*

After the first cycle of AR, in subsequent experiments with larger groups, we acknowledged that sometimes it feels easier to retreat into the transactional invitation. Not all our gestures inviting a different kind of conversation are met with a yes.

> *'My learning is that it's still so very easy to play into the system-world, instrumental, task focused narrative as we make invitations; it's quicker, it's less weird, it seemingly gets things moving…and yet it gets them moving within the existing mindset rather than enabling something different.'*

Place

We noted from our own work as a small group that where we met impacted our degree of psychological safety (Mason, 1993) helping us create a communicative space (Kemmis, 2001). Our first meeting was in an oval shaped Home Office 'pod,' which created a sense of *'being self contained, apart from the silence and seriousness of the open plan office'.* At this first meeting, one person reflected afterwards on a *'lovely moment when we noticed …. two people with shoes off and one with feet on the chair and how this in itself was a gesture of collective counter culturalism!",* already a willingness to examine how we could and couldn't sit at work. Our second small group meeting was in a Civil Service office which necessitated ID and bag scanning, a cultural artefact (Schein, 2010) shaping who is allowed to enter with ease, and who not. Subsequently, we met in cafes with quiet corners as a more informal space helped legitimise and encourage more lifeworld content and connection. Meeting with a very senior leader in a café, as part of the first cycle of AR, one of us reflected '*they told me things they admitted they would not normally say to colleagues at work",* a mirroring of our own experience as a small group.

Agendas

In a culture with a preference for task and outputs, the lack of an agenda carries symbolic as well as practical implications. Creating an unstructured space for conversation disturbs the expectations of the system world (Habermas, 1984) and can engender discomfort and yet, in that imbalance, communicative spaces can be created and nurtured. In our small group, we described our gestures to create such perturbations as moments of 'positive deviance' (Sternin & Choo, 2000).

> *'Having no agenda was a challenge for some…..and …an agenda-less meeting felt non-work based. However, people would often state they had valued the conversation and that the conversation had triggered them to think differently.'*

> *'The intro opened up a much deeper level of discussion about individual and collective purpose. The planned agenda effectively*

> *went out of the window and the conversation this group needed
> (rather than thought they wanted) followed.'*

In our small group, we noted that challenging cultural norms can be as uncomfortable for us, as for others.

> *'My goal became to become 'comfortable with being
> uncomfortable'. I found this particularly important in holding the
> space in conversations, not being drawn to old patterns of creating
> structure and agendas because I was uncomfortable.'*

Noticing and naming energy

In OD, the concept of self as instrument (Cheung-Judge, 2012) encourages noticing and inquiring into one's own feelings 'in the moment,' as a source of somatic knowing (Johnson, 2011) into what might be going on for self and the client system. In our small group, we explored our feelings and intended moves to invite senior leaders for a conversation about leadership. This gave ourselves individually, and collectively, permission that this was legitimate, expanding our confidence to make moves counter to the norms of the system world. The first- and second-person AR thus encouraged us to notice our own energy and was a sign of something different happening, of the creation of a communicative space (Kemmis, 2001), of the presence of the lifeworld and the human. At the same time, a lack of energy, or the contrast between the feel of conversations versus meetings, left us juggling, shuttling between what felt to be different worlds with different cultural norms, and expectations about what we could and couldn't do.

> *'When I am in the zone of conversations, big or small, rather than
> meetings – to put it simply – I feel I give and receive energy in a
> way that just doesn't happen in other contexts. That is my main
> barometer for emboldening me to act because it's what I really can
> do.'*

> *'[talking together we enable] different stories about the Civil
> Service to dominate, we bring light to them, bring them above the
> radar and show why, even in the toughest circumstances, we can
> be productive, creative and have fun together… and if more of that
> is possible, possibly only a teaspoon more, then maybe more of the
> 'can' and the 'humane' is enabled here.'*

Empowered by the inquiry question

A significant learning has been the power of holding in mind the question of what I / we can and can't do. In the first inquiry cycle, we explored what gestures we could make to shift meetings to conversations. Since then, we have continued to hold the question in mind and engaged in further first and second person inquiry, realizing the question helped us think about the assumptions underpinning the choices we faced enacting our day-to-day OD roles. It empowered us to think about when we could encourage a more lifeworld approach to what others had framed as a meeting; when we could show up as ourselves, be un-muted and put aside role and rank.

> *'The can and can't element of the question remains most pertinent. Holding that as a line of inquiry enables me to confront what constraints I'm placing upon myself and what constraints I perceive in the systems I operate in. …..It helps me determine whether to intervene, recognising that we have a choice to intervene, or not, and both have an impact.'*

Implications of this research

In terms of theory, this AR shows the possibility of surfacing the underlying assumptions about beliefs and values that are normally deemed inaccessible in layer models of culture (Schein, 2010; Myers et al., 2012). If such assumptions are buried too deep to speak about, logically, this makes them hard to change, which in turn is likely to act as a break on efforts to shift cultural patterns and practices. However, our research question 'what can I and can't I do?' gave us a way of surfacing and exploring hitherto unexamined assumptions. Our experience thus challenges the notion that such assumptions are inaccessible, opening the possibility of shifting cultural patterns by surfacing them.

In this paper, we have focussed on our assumptions about what was considered 'normal' in terms of meeting a senior leader in the Civil Service. The inquiry question allowed the possibility of 'discussing the undiscussable' (Argyris, 1980). By asking what can or can't do, in a given moment, we, as insider-researchers, were

suddenly made aware of our assumptions and in doing so, had the possibility of considering alternative gestures. Choosing to make a different gesture from the default created the possibility for new patterns to emerge, unshackled from hitherto unexamined assumptions. Bringing assumptions into awareness does not mean that individuals will always choose to act in counter cultural ways. We noted that sometimes we didn't feel 'up' for making a different gesture, sometimes feeling less robust, or tired. So awareness does not inevitably lead to acting differently, and we may still choose to 'mute' (Shah, 2001). However, inquiry into the reasons for muting, offered further insights into individual and collective perceptions of power and risk.

Whilst hierarchical organizations are often likened to machines (Morgan, 1986), this research shows embracing the idea of complex responsive processes allowed us as insider researchers, to believe we could make a range of different gestures in the hope, even if not the certainty, of gaining a different response. Viewing organizations through the lens of complexity (Stacey, 2011), was thus also liberating, allowing us the possibility of different moves and micro gestures, without feeling responsible for whether or not the 'other' welcomed the gesture.

Empowered by both holding the research question and it's deliberate provocation to consider our own agency, we were able to change meetings into conversations, allowing the lifeworld to make an entrance into the system world, and fostering human, rather than role based, interaction. However, this is not to suggest that shifting such patterns is easy or simple. 'Shifting embedded power requires a mix of both deliberate actions and spotting and amplifying signs of the new as they emerge or as you create or encounter them,' (Wiggins and Hunter, 2016, p. 85). We too have found that multiple gestures (outlined above) were required, made thoughtfully and over time.

This research supports the notion that creating communicative spaces within organizations is important, and life enhancing work, where people can be themselves without fear of judgement or sanction i.e. without needing to worry what they can and can't say.

> *'Our small group [gave me] the freedom to just write something
> and send it off without feeling the need to check and recheck. This
> allows a 'breathing out', a being alive, an expectation of having an
> interesting and unfiltered conversation with coming together.'*

This in turn has allowed us to develop the skills and confidence to create communicative spaces with others, beyond our small inquiry group and in our role as OD practitioners.

Further practical implications

The role of a small co-inquiry group

This enabled us to have purposeful and productive conversations together which then mirrored the offer to senior leaders in the system. It enabled us to learn and grow in our understanding of AR, providing a restorative and communicative space to rehearse and explore what gestures we might make as individuals, with like-minded people…helping each to be 10% braver. A focussed question meant there was a discipline and purpose to our meeting, as well as a joy in gathering together.

The value of the question to encourage living life as inquiry

OD practitioners are encouraged to pay attention to feelings and embody the idea of the 'self as instrument' (Cheung-Judge, 2012). The question of what 'I can and can't do,' has provided a helpful reminder to question our own, and others, assumptions which gives us, as OD practitioners, more possibilities for action. The inquiry question is thus empowering and energizing, legitimizing us to explore a myriad of cultural assumptions about what is and isn't possible. It has thus become the way many of us are now doing our jobs so has gone far beyond the notion of shifting meetings to conversations so that we are now living life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999).

Multiple gestures are required

We identified a range of gestures to shifting a meeting to a conversation. However, our experiences suggest that single gestures are rarely sufficient. Here again our inquiry question is helpful and empowering, reminding us to have that internal reflection on what we can and can't do, in a specific context, with a

particular individual. So maybe meeting for a coffee would be appreciated but meeting for lunch would be seen as 'too much'.

Stacey (2011) reminds us that, in making a gesture, we should act with good intentions, acknowledging that there is uncertainty as we don't know what response we will receive. There is a kindness and compassion required to both self and others if, for whatever reason, such gestures are rebuffed for now. However, the experience of this research has given us the confidence to keep making such gestures to create a 'communicative space' where we can connect as human beings, allowing the lifeworld more into the system world.

Time

As the writers of this paper, we worked on this inquiry for 3 years. Time was taken to explore the gestures required to shift meetings to conversation. Do leaders always have the time to pay this level of granular attention to the moves they make? A practical consideration is thus the recognition shifting cultural norms requires time and multiple gestures. As such, we offer the notion of 'tempered tenacity' (Wiggins, 2020) to describes the ongoing need to keep making gestures that encourage the creation of communicative spaces and gradually encourage others to reconsider what they think they can and can't do. The reward is moments of human connection, and the presence of the lifeworld in the system world.

Limitations of the research

This research is part of a broader piece of exploration into culture initiated by the Civil Service OD&D team (unpublished) and therefore, we are not attempting to claim that on our own, we have been responsible for shifting 'the' culture from meetings to conversation. (At the same time, we note that we conceptually view culture as multifaceted and multi-layered, with many overlapping sub cultures rather than there being a single culture.) We were neither intending, nor suggesting, that we have shifted the culture at scale, even though questions on this topic are valid and interesting. Concepts such as leaders' role in amplifying

gestures (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) and tipping points (Gladwell, 2002) offer ideas about how this might occur. At the same time, we suggest that it is helpful motivationally to avoid thinking about the whole, the generalized other, as there is a risk that in doing so, the task of shifting culture can be seen as too big, too burdensome to even start. Instead, a benefit of Stacey's (2011) conception of organizations as complex responsive processes encourages us as individuals to make shifts in our own immediate context by making different gestures in a sustained way over time. Our hope is that this account is encouragement to individuals to explore and experiment with micro gestures to shift cultural patterns in their own immediate context.

As with all writing up of research, rather than participating in the research, the words we have chosen and the first- and second-person inquiry data are inevitably partial and cannot convey the totality of the experience. In a small group session, one of us brought fruit to share. To quote ourselves, '*An account of eating a strawberry is not the same as eating a strawberry.*'

It might also be argued that the specific context of the Civil Service is unique given its public role in the UK, the requirement to be professionally neutral and the particular challenges of the time during which this research took place. Whilst true, we believe that in many organizations the system world squeezes out and mutes the lifeworld (Shah, 2001) and therefore hope that the gestures we describe may have resonance in organizations beyond the Civil Service.

Conclusion

Ison argues 'knowledge arises in social relations such that all knowing is doing… (it is) both the result of and the process of inquiry where neither theory nor practice takes precedence,' (2010, p. 148). This paper has attempted to share some of the experience of three years AR project, exploring what we could and couldn't do as insider researchers, who are OD practitioners in the Civil Service at a particular time. As Coleman, writes, 'in organisational settings, (AR) can provide a means through which questions that

sit on the edge of 'what can be talked about' can be surfaced, validated and tested through action,' (2017, p. 162). Our experience of examining our assumptions using our can/can't inquiry question shone a spotlight on cultural patterns in relation to meetings and allowed us to be thoughtful in the gestures and micro moves we choose to make.

Strengths of this research include it being a story of a collaborative endeavour in terms of action, reflection and the writing up of this paper. The work has had a significant impact on the practice of us as OD leaders participating in this small AR group; the powerful and helpful inquiry question influenced the way we became the 'grit in the oyster' challenging assumptions around hierarchy and shifting meetings to conversations. The work explores how the inquiry question and small gestures can shift perceived ingrained or stuck patterns that form a culture and it has illustrated a method that is congruent with, and mirrors, the work and values of OD practitioners. Through inquiry and reflection on practical experience, it challenges the notion embedded in layer models of culture that assumptions are buried too deep to be explored.

Acknowledgements

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Biographies

Dr Liz Wiggins is Professor of Leadership and Change at Ashridge Executive Education, part of Hult International Business School. She is an experienced action researcher who also works as an executive coach, OD practitioner, Board level facilitator and leadership developer. She sees herself as a thought partner for her clients who rarely get the time to think at a deeper, more considered level about what is really going on, how they might approach things differently and what they want to achieve personally, professionally and organizationally

Carolyn Norgate is an OD professional and joined Mayvin as Principal Consultant in 2019, bringing with her over 25 years' experience in OD, learning and change roles in the UK Civil Service and NHS. Carolyn is passionate about developing the adaptive capacity of people and systems to learn and thrive and brings both a mindset and set of methodologies from complexity science to her work.

Carolyn Parker is a HR and OD professional, with 15 years' experience across private and public sector. Her passion is creating inclusive workplace cultures where people can thrive and realise their full potential. She is currently working in the NHS.

Janet Barker is an experienced leadership development and learning specialist with over 30 years' experience in the public sector. In her roles in the UK Civil Service, she has a particular interest in managing talent.

Keith Grieve has over 30 years' experience in the public sector, mostly in HR roles and in the OD space; an inclusive, curious and empathetic leader working in service of strategic outcomes and a brilliant people experience.

Collaborative writing as action research: A story in the making

Diana Austin, Yedida Bessemer, Susan Goff, Geof Hill, Liz Orr and Vicki Vaartjes

Abstract

A small, transnational group of action researchers came into a collaborative writing venture as part of a broader research inquiry. The inquiry was looking into the role of action research publications in manifesting action research in the world. It was mandated by the Action Learning Action Research Association as input to strategic planning for the future publication directions of the association. Early in our research engagement, the group was offered an opportunity to critically examine our collaborative writing process as it was unfolding, to carry out real time action research into writing up action research and action learning, proceeding through publication into a journal, and tracking how the paper played a role if any, in the manifestation of action research and action learning in the world. Our intention is to share these reflections with ALARA readership beginning with the formation of the collaboration and the working out of how to write together. This paper captures the in-time articulation of language, argumentation, peer and reviewer critique as a way of manifesting the structures, methods and choices that we, as a group, are grappling with as we seek to actualise egalitarian and participatory principles to deliver our co-research. The paper aims to benefit fellow practitioners who have an interest in collaborative writing ventures.

Key words: Co-operative action inquiry, collaborative academic writing, action research, collaboration, action research process, reflection, researchers' relationships

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What is known about the topic?

Richardson (1994) and Richardson & St Pierre (2005) discuss writing from a sociological/ethnographic standpoint.

What does this paper add?

The article is a collective and collaborative first person action inquiry in existential mode.

Who will benefit from its content?

Many action research writers, or collaborative writing efforts face similar challenges of working with with peers and reviewers.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

The article illuminates some of the dilemmas between writers and reviewers and how we managed different agendas within a collaborative effort to achieve publication.

Introduction

> The starting point...must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people... [We] must pose this... to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at an intellectual level, but at a level of action. (Freire, 1970, p. 75, cited in Reason, 2006, p. 188)

This paper examines the experience of collaborative writing with relevance to action research. We are a small group of action researchers, each with doctoral qualifications and together representing a range of action research experience, sectoral and disciplinary backgrounds. We are a transnational group formed to carry out a research inquiry into the role of action research publications in manifesting action research. The results of the inquiry are to be used as input into the strategic planning of the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA)'s publication strategies. The Association recognises that the field of publishing Action Research and Action Learning has changed over the last thirty years, as has the need for and forms of Action Learning and Action Research and of publication. This paper is a reflexive narrative, describing our emerging praxis, as we engage

together in the early stages of the research project. To this end it represents a living reflection of an emerging collaboration, an iterative script shared for the benefit of fellow practitioners who have an interest in collaborative writing ventures.

The "working-together-as-a-collaborative-group" emerged haphazardly over time. The idea of the research project was born at the 2019 Conference in Croatia by the initial collaborator as a contribution to the ALARA Publications Group. Expressions of interest were subsequently invited through an ALARA 2020 newsletter to attract action researchers from ALARA's international membership. This prompted the second collaborator to join. Others joined between October 2020 and May 2021, drawn to the work through chance conversations which triggered interest. The group is now made up of six collaborators, four in Australia, and one each in New Zealand and the United States of America. We are supported by a 'critical friend' located in South Africa, manifesting a truly transnational collaboration.

> *I was excited to be meeting with other action researchers who (maybe) were interested in some of the issues about academic writing and specifically academic writing of action research that I harboured. In the first discussion and upon reading transcripts of what had already been discussed in conversations prior to my joining the group, I could see many areas of resonance (Personal reflections - Collaborator 2)*

Scholarly writing, and perhaps all writing other than that which is entirely personal, is always collaborative. One or more authors draw on the participatory endeavours of co-researchers, as well as referred publications whose powerful texts bring rough and smooth additions to the argumentation. This in turn is subject to scrutiny as drafts are sent to reviewers and editors who interrogate and challenge architectures of thought, expression and expertise, and which finally are submitted via the publication, to a reader who could be said to be the ultimate author of any written piece (Seel, 2005). All of these elements are essential to the generative process that is collaborative writing.

As action researchers, we are acutely aware that as we engage in the process of our action research inquiry, the process of collaborative authorship of this paper is a manifestation of action research at a micro level. In its most obvious and simplified form, action research seeks to achieve an action objective and a research objective. The two inform each other in iterative steps such that the critically informed insight gained by 'researching the action', in this case the many stages of generation and critical review of text, informs the next cycle of doing the action – in this case, writing. The intention of each cycle is to refine, improve, and clarify. The product is intended to be a unique offering relevant to any collaborative writing effort, and most particularly to the interests and specifications of ALARA.

This is the process we are undertaking as collaborative authors. At a macro level, each of us is working to achieve our action objectives, raising and articulating our personal reflections on our own action research publication practices and integrating these ideas into the emerging narrative of the group. At many points along the way, we shift to critical review and reflection both personally, as a group and through the interventions of reviewers and editors. In these moments we grapple with questions of progress, expectation and purpose: *what actually is it that we are trying to create here - together?* As we move between writing, critical inquiry, review and adjustment to our thinking and process to inform the next stage of work, we manifest multiple micro cycles of action research.

This paper brings together our own and reviewer voices, shares early lessons and practical strategies that we have grappled with so far. It is borne of our observations from within as we execute our ALARA-mandated inquiry, and from our more immediate and reflexive experience of co-authoring this paper.

> *It was with excitement and nervousness I joined a zoom meeting with people I had not met. I knew we* would *all* have *an interest in AR.* H*owever, the initial encounters felt uncomfortable and quite different to my conversations about AR with colleagues locally. The first task of writing reflected these feelings. Resisting*

> *the temptation to withdraw I have stayed and have a growing*
> *sense of becoming connected to a wider group of action researchers,*
> *who engage in a slightly different discourse, something that can*
> *only enrich my own journey (Personal reflections - Collaborator*
> *1).*

What our collaboration means

Figure 1: Word cloud of our early notations to contribute to self-reflection on progress.

Articles describing collaborative writing within the action research field are rare. The following quotation situates the task within a large scale, multi-national action research inquiry into youth unemployment. It details the purposes to which collaborative writing were put in this context:

> … Our research approach was shaped by different team members' experiences of reflexive ethnography, narrative based research, post-positivist qualitative research, as well as action research and systemic action inquiry…. Our intention was not to "prove", but to stimulate new forms of critical and creative inquiry amongst ourselves and for others working in the field[s}…Researchers would prepare a paper, raising issues that drew on the full range of participant voices and research activity. Prior to each meeting, these national papers would be reviewed by one country in preparation for our subsequent meeting. A seventh cross-cultural paper would result, outlining key contours, contradictions, and questions arising across the six within-country data sets. (Weil, Wildemeersch & Percy-Smith, 2005, pp. 10-11)

In this paper we consider the experience of making ourselves transnational authors and collaborators, synchronous and bound into one authorial, polyvocal identity. Collaborative writing means that many authors are reading, reviewing, editing, redrafting and bringing a greater diversity of references and field experiences into the one effort. According to Schimmer (2018), collaborative work has evolved throughout the years to reflect three levels:

1. Collaboration 1.0: collaboration as a process is a means to an end where people work together to deliver an outcome.

2. Collaboration 2.0: collaborators focused on developing the skills to act competently within a collaborative effort, such that acquiring the collaborative skills was the end goal.

3. Collaboration 3.0: the process is generative and collaborators focus on both collaboration and innovation. "People collaborate in order to find a solution to a problem that *is too challenging to solve alone*" (Schimmer, 2018, slide 29).

The task of collaborative writing and delivery of the ALARA research inquiry positions this group at Collaboration 3.0 as it is true that the task requires both collaborative effort and innovation. Collaboration 2.0 is evident as we each engage and learn what it means to be truly collaborative.

> At this point in the text, in our first reviewed draft, a reviewer was inspired to refer us to Triple Loop Learning (Flood & Romm, 2018). We discussed this insertion at a web conference where we reflected on reviewers' comments and agreed that we were familiar with the framework, and it could be said to have relevance given the generative nature of the collaboration. However, we also did not want to lose the sequence of thinking from the identification of Schimmer and the thoughts which followed in the original draft which do not exactly map onto Triple Loop learning. We chose not to include the reference at this point.

The challenges facing the group are practical, conceptual and philosophical. In collaborating the group is coming together, constructing ideas, and creating new social awarenesses with very little pre-existing relationship. In effect the process is providing space to build relationships while giving expression to our ontological questions such as, '*what is there that can be known*?' and epistemological ones, '*how do we come to know and articulate what is knowable together?*' (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

The challenges are also relational and creative – in fact, they could very easily be structured according to the participatory epistemology (Heron & Reason, 1997) which embraces the experiential, presentational, propositional and practical domains of knowing in a nested system. Or as described by Indigenous scholars as ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing (Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003).

> *I was motivated to join this diverse group of action researchers in an exciting endeavour to studying the process of collaborative writing. I was the last person to join and was warmly welcomed by all. Even though we are dispersed over different continents and time zones, sharing and circulating one document connected us; a document in which we write about our various collaborative writing experiences. This digital paper links us together and tells our writing story. It is a living document that evolves through different cycles where all of our voices are heard, just as in action research. (Personal reflections - Collaborator 6)*

> At this point in the original draft, a reviewer noted the reference to Indigenous ways of knowing, in the previous paragraph and encouraged us to expand on this point. However, as "non-indigenous" researchers, we are also thoughtful about representing Indigenous Knowledge Systems when we are out of direct relationship with such knowledge holders. Many of us have worked in cross-cultural research environments and have learned to make room for Indigenous practitioners working on decolonising knowledge when they are absent from the inquiry group, and not to speak for them. We agreed that we had built critique of our work from non-western action researchers into the effort once our first report to ALARA was written up. We agreed that it was sufficient to make reference to non-western ways of thinking and researching only at this point in time.
>
> By literally scribing our engagement with external commentaries at the precise location in which the reviewers left their notations, we are becoming more sensitive to how this paper is transforming away from an abstract holder of thought and into an artefact tracing the experience of writing over time.

We also exhibited this interdependency by our individual and collective effort to find a delicate balance among three elements: the six individuals, the team as a whole, and the purpose or objective of our team. Irwin (2018, p. 115) asserted that there is an ongoing interaction among the *I*, the *We*, and the *It*. "The *I* represents our individual hopes, dreams, and concerns. The *We* represents the collective aspirations, interests, and potential conflicts among group members. The *It* expresses our purpose, mission, task, or quest." For a successful and healthy team, we must understand the dynamics and influence of each element on the others and strive to work together to reach this delicate balance.

To establish a strong foundation as a group required bringing to the surface our belief systems about knowledge. Understanding and acknowledging each of our world views, as individuals and as

members of the communities in which we exist became an essential starting point in coming together as collaborators. The interconnectedness that had gone before was now being brought into the new system that would be further shaped and integrated.

> *I really like action research and I believe it is a great way to make change. I have read numerous books, articles and written about the methodology. However, I am consciously aware that this is how Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, are in the world. They are in the world as a community, not individuals. I frequently ponder that action research is merely a Western label for how many communities are in the world and have been so since the beginning of time. (Personal reflections - Collaborator 1)*

According to Senge et al. (2012), understanding the relationships between the different elements within a system and their interconnectedness is crucial for improving any organizational system since such an approach attempts to see the whole picture rather than isolating its different parts. This interconnectedness characterizes an open, learning and thinking system. Understanding the importance of interconnectedness and heritage affects one's perspective of the organization system as a whole and of its elements. Like systems thinking, the collaborative writing process focuses on the interactions and influences between the different participant-writers. It encourages creativity, acknowledgment of different perspectives, ongoing reflection, and ongoing learning through quality improvement; it is continually developing, adapting, and transforming itself. How this takes place is as much a matter of our distinctive cultural heritages as it is anything else – even if some fail to see academic procedures as cultural heritage.

At a critical point in the co-writing, one of us recalls working on a participatory action research project inquiring into health promotion and how it can be developed by Indigenous early childhood educators. A literature review was conducted to inform early reflection stages, and the group of Indigenous co-researchers responded to the review by painting a group picture. The themes were identified drawing on cultural practices such as

intergenerational learning, storytelling, eating bush foods and deep listening. Images were created in one afternoon by everyone in bright colours and the whole symbolic collection enabled the group to name the research as the "whirly whirly project" – calling into view the little winds that pick up pieces and bring them into one spiral of energy. We felt that their particular analysis and interpretation of the literature, through their cultural and professional eyes had been like one of these forces of nature, creating one culturally attuned strategic framework to guide the inquiry.

The act of articulating thought for this research effort, through language and structure of presentation which is itself unfolding and leading co-researchers ever more deeply into the act of writing and reading, could be understood as highly tuned cultural performances, an experiential knowing where sensitivity to writing and reading are heightened. – just as the First Nations participants in the story above, saw action research as a whirly whirly practice. The unfolding text was not read as a means to an end of data or information gathering, or tracing an account of applied method, but read for the act of writing – as if there is no time between the finger on the keyboard and the reader's eye on the resulting print and the ensuing processes of sense making.

Referring back to Heron and Reason's (1997) Extended Epistemology, the heightened purpose and critical thinking become the emerging structure of presentational knowing practices, encompassing patterning and sense making about each person's writing. Collaborative writing provides space to bring diverse and extensive primary research data into accessible frameworks of analysis, and also enable the exchange of writing from different nation standpoints to create new questions (Weil et al, 2005), alignments, contradictions, confusions, connections and welcomings into new terrains. The act of co-authoring is not merely a transactional activity of one author layering language and meaning onto another's work. Rather, the process is generative, creative and an expression of what can be known at that time and in this space.

Into each of our contributions we weave and privilege particular ways of thinking and doing, and thus become alert to how specific constructions of reality come to be given more status in society and how researchers can serve to undercut undue privileging of views. This is the ontological concern of the transformative researcher (Romm, 2018). We search through our libraries to sew in our references, our data from journals and other written forms, that together build the theorisation of propositional knowing. This processing is enhanced by web conferences and the insights that form through dialogue and living relationships. Our memories of TED Talks, conversations, conference papers and workshops, videos, films and podcasts also trigger states of knowing and unknowing. Collaborative writing is cultural – it reflects and strengthens our identity/ies and puts them to good use – though you our reader and ultimate author will be the judge of that.

We take all these further into our writing as the iterations unfold, in new hands, learning as we go, building the text on the page in response to what each person expresses. This becomes our practice knowing – adding to the practice of us as co-authors and researchers and hopefully, adding to the practices of our post publication readers.

All the while we hold core questions: *Why do we do this? What are the hallmarks that make collaborative writing particular to action research? What are the rewards, and what the lessons to be learned? And how does writing action research collaboratively contribute to its living manifestations?* To keep us grounded we might be asking: *How do we need to write to meet the needs of contemporary audiences and their living, working and learning worlds?*

Assumptions underpinning our collaboration

As we write this, we are mostly strangers to each other. Two of us have worked together in action research projects – so we have seen each other in practice and have written together before this. Even so, we have not really sat down and discussed philosophy, core references or how we work with them. All of us have undertaken inquiry based on individual doctoral degree submissions all

utilising action research, and in doing so we have experienced the challenges/frustrations/benefits of having to work individually. Now we have the opportunity to share our collaborative body of knowledge that also accumulates over time and makes a collective rather than individual contribution.

> *The growing connectedness is exhilarating. It seems too long ago that I worked with team players and I am enjoying the safety of collaboration and co-operation (Personal reflections - Collaborator 4)*

We all come together under ALARA's banner. We have done our introductions, so we know our disciplinary diversity, our institutional contexts (or lack of them), and a little bit about our dissertations. But if we were to ask each other – what do you understand action research to be? – we would likely be fascinated by our distinctive answers. And that might be putting it politely. So, we come together with the understanding that common understanding is rare, and while we might point to the reflection/action cycles, just how we understand reflection and action, and how each relates to the other, might also be points of fascinating departures. Some or at least one of us might say – there are more elements to the cycles than just those dimensions. Indeed, another would add that time and place dimensions are often left out of the cycles, and we have learning from Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing distinctive to our own "non-indigenous" colonising cultures – still to do! We are probably adherents to the concept of standpoint theory and positionality, may or may not be comfortable with constructivism, but mostly likely feel good about each of us having our own understandings of these approaches and respecting each other's as essential to the systems that hold our global fields together.

At a point in our discussion, one of us recalls a moment in a different team, of being 'struck' by deep philosophical differences between team members, that would go on to have consequences for the team's collaboration. Cunliffe (2002, p. 42) describes this notion of being 'struck' as an embodied reaction that holds "an anticipation of unfolding understanding, of making new

connections between tacit knowing and explicit knowledge as we construct our sense of situations in ways not visible to us previously". In this case, a multi-disciplinary team had been assembled to deliver a complex project for a government client through remote engagement due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic. With the pressure of tight delivery timelines, a strong focus on task, and dealing with the many challenges of web-based meetings, little space was made for philosophical discussion or exploration of deeper thought. The 'moment' that this changed was when one team member articulated a critical assumption that they held about the project that revealed a diversity in ontological theory within the team, that if unresolved, would go on to have material consequences for choice of project methodology. In effect, the moment of being 'struck' revealed the fragility of the ideal of 'shared assumptions'. It is not enough for the struggle to complete a shared task to be relied upon to reveal deeper thinking and make it available for critical engagement. Instead, there must be some level of conscious effort to schedule and value the conversations that dive deep and reveal our individual assumptions, biases and beliefs. For teams that wish to truly collaborate in task delivery, the question is an important one: how can we come to form a collective vision from diverse disciplinary and ontological standpoints? Is this even possible if the ontologies arise from vastly different world views? Or will privileging of dominant ways of thinking, including through the ordinary power and social influence structures of a team environment, always limit the potential of egalitarian collaboration?

If we reflect on this team's heritage which characterises our assumptions, some say action research has been around since the 1940's, and yet others are surprised to learn so – or wonder at the relevance of that history. As soon as Indigenous Knowledge Systems are brought into the discussion it becomes very clear that action research has been around for thousands of years – essential to learning for survival. Lewin (1946, p. 35) coined the term action research and highlighted the call to act with intent to social action. He claimed that:

> The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice.

More recently action research has been picked up by just about every discipline and economic sector in the world, but rarely is it conducted as originally conceived. Off-the-shelf management programs and buzzwords like `codesign' fill up the space for a while, then loose favour. The elements of action research are cherry picked, leaving disconnected bare branches that need patching back together again by custodians of the field whose lifetime investments are alert to what stays the same and what disappears over time. Useful methods become orphaned from their methodological parents – and even more disturbingly, their ontological grandparents. New hybrids are popularised with key details lost – most notably and recently the loss of the systemic reach; principled praxis; the power of those repeated cycles; the disconnection of 'action' from action research that posits semi-structured interviews and other forms of data harvesting as 'action research'.

Action research enables people to study the problems they face and to explore possible solutions. Its primary goal is to offer people tools and direction to examine issues and/or needs, develop a plan to solve a problem, and reflect on its effectiveness. "Action research works on the assumption that all people who affect or are affected by the issue investigated should be included in the process of inquiry." (Stringer, 2014, p. 6). In other words, it requires collaboration when exploring and examining an issue and when devising a solution, after which a collaborative reflection and evaluation of the solution is undertaken. On this we all agree.

Another common understanding might be that action research is a school or family of methods that relate to participatory and qualitative research that intends to inform change for the "better." But so often that which is branded 'participatory' is not. And one person's "better "can be another person's breaking point.

Quantitative approaches can be included where participatory governance is strong, and change largely does not happen within the research endeavour but as a result of it, if we are lucky (Bradley, 2020).

Unsettling though, in this exercise at least – is the question: can we assume that writing about action research, even writing about writing as action research, is necessarily theorizing… necessarily reflective? Or can writing be action, being a practice after all, and if so what aspect of action research is it? How do we discipline the edges between action and reflection, doing without theorizing – and do we need to theorize? Writing as a process can in itself clarify thought and action and generate further thought and action but it is not the only way to share knowledge. In fact, for some cultures, some groups, some people the written word is intimidating and inaccessible. So, what does that mean for our aims of transformative practice to create greater equalities in our communities and world? What does it mean for the future of publication?

Becoming better collaborators

In these early stages of our engagement together, we have become aware of tensions that emerge as a diverse group of people grapple with what it means to truly and genuinely collaborate. One issue essential to participatory practices, is that of governance – how a participatory endeavour is to be organised, and who says so (Heron, 1999). Governance in participatory action research is also a question of power. More precisely, this concerns the authorised space to question power which in other methodologies remains undiscussed and thus (mostly) unconsciously replicated in whatever resources or other outcomes manifest from that research. Power as gender, as legacies, power as institutional conventions all lean into an action research opportunity – all influence and play their part as cloaked stalkers and shaped-up enablers. Transparent and conscious governance, whether structured of unstructured is crucial to the difference. (Freeman, 1973; Reason, 2006).

At the beginning of this endeavour, we did not consider ourselves a team. We may have been simply a community of practitioners (Wenger, 2000) keen to explore common ground. We started a *teaming* process where we collaborated across boundaries, conducted honest and direct conversation while seeking feedback, utilized reflection according to our project's needs, and practiced an iterative approach (Edmondson, 2012). This formation necessitated our encountering of roles, responsibilities, principles of practice and distinctions or values. We have not formalised these yet into a framework, but this paper may well have provided an honest means of doing so, without aspiration but with practical knowledge.

At this point, as we write a final draft of the paper together, governance in our collaborative work is complex and dynamic. There is no assigned 'leader' or singular authority in our intentionally unstructured and egalitarian process. As a group of people with agency, opinions and ideas about how to progress the research inquiry, we have experienced the push-pull of power relations as an expected and at times frustrating part of the group's dynamic. We are learning what it means to manage agreement and establish clear understandings between us. At times misunderstandings and lack of shared clarity have created blockages to progress that must in some way be dissolved into deeper understanding. In those moments, one or more of the group are faced with the need to 'step up' and decide what to do to next. In those moments, we ask: *how can we do better at managing agreement and once established, how can we be adaptive, responsive, and understanding as agreements crumble with the realities of every-day life?*

> *The uncertainty about leadership always troubles me. I know too well what it is to be silenced and am sensitive to influences of attractor or detractor forces in how I present to and with others. On the other hand, let's jump in the deep end together and just see what comes up. Sibling relationships are difficult for an only child. Don't they say wherever you start in action research is always right and wrong? No goldilocks here but paradox everywhere (Personal reflections - Collaborator 3)*

We quickly discovered how easily version control becomes out of control, as co-authors attempt to find their way through emails and conversations. A request was made for a schedule to provide some structure to the effort. The schedule suggested a linear sequence of writing, with no privileging of any one member's status to underpin a hierarchy of authority. The sequence was alphabetical, and rotated tasks such as breaking the glare of the blank page, or editing the first draft, so that a more random enabling of inspiration and emergent form could take place. We did not brainstorm to set up a skeletal structure or even agree what our assumptions might be before we committed fingertips to keys. This approach reflected the principles of mutual respect, trust in some commonality in a shared field (action research) and equity, underpinned by careful consideration of shared informed consent. If a person could not contribute within the timing and sequencing in the schedule, then contribution could be picked up in subsequent rounds - reflecting the principle of fairness.

The first draft of our collaborative writing was done quickly and completed within a week. The effort could be characterised as a "Rapid Authorial Appraisal" with a nod to Chambers' Rapid Rural Appraisal (1981). The agreement to deliver together within this timeframe created a bond, something of a recognition of how action researchers are accustomed to stepping into the very hard too hard basket, with the sure confidence that we can do this. Audacity, delusion or perhaps understanding that the world presents itself to us in these complex ways and action researchers arrive into or are born from within them for just that reality. The writing was an iterative creation. As each member engaged in writing the paper added their reflection on their participation with the group. Parameters on how to reflect or respond were not provided allowing an openness and vulnerability as each person took their turn. This process mirrored that which we agreed to meeting the overarching purpose of the collaboration - reflecting the principle of ethical praxis.

> *The writing together is exciting and with each cycle, I look forward to seeing what has been added and how the creative process is bringing together something that is rich in meaning and significance despite our differences, unfamiliarity and distance. I also experience tensions – wondering what permissions I have to edit another's text, making time for zoom discussions and giving writing the head space and attention it deserves. However, having experienced collaborative writing and witnessed the mysterious way in which a text travels a bumpy and uncertain path, but then comes together as a cohesive and useful narrative, I have faith and trust in the process. (Personal reflections - Collaborator 5)*

Our writing, and our writing together, is entirely at home across our many geographies, and is occurring in a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is still raging in many parts of the globe. This context has forced us all to become accustomed to remote and online working, and we bring that comfort to our meetings. It is important to note that we made sure to schedule synchronous meetings where we saw each other, reported on our progress, shared thoughts and ideas, and planned the next steps between the circulation of our digital document. The synchronous check-in meetings reinforced our joint commitment and held us accountable to complete our tasks. This teamwork schedule aligned well with the results from Rico and Cohen's study that virtual teams that employ synchronous digital tools to communicate performed better than those who used asynchronous tools to connect (Rico & Cohen, 2005). We have become used to revealing the depth of our thinking and revealing vulnerabilities by talking to a screen and a microphone and not being surprised if no one responds because they are 'on mute'. If this task had been pre-COVID, we may well have experienced less comfort with our remote collaboration and more troubled by the reliance on technology as the only means of bringing us together from across the globe. And we learned as engaged: as each of us layered in our preferences – comments on the margins, overwriting others' words, inviting others to overwrite ours, setting up familiar headings, responding to them in our ways, lining up with each other, and wondering away as the thought started by others seeded in our own minds…. Smiling at

the references that were on our library shelves (or more likely EndNotes) too, or wondering what that newcomer reference was and how did I miss it? We learned from each other as we wrote. The process was dizzying – forever progressing through to a narrow strip of collaborative action on which to comment as the text grew – and then to find our observational toes had once again reached the edge of "what is" as we came to the end of our contribution. How much of this paper has been written? How and how far to leap into the abyss of the blank page - of what was not yet? How to make a little more material for the next author to comment upon? Building our vessel as we sail(ed).

We are faced with choices and options. Action research facilitators may employ group mind mapping, sequential writing one line at a time within group interactions, nominal drafting where participants write first thoughts in private, and bring them together in public so that their thinking is not influenced by each other. These may be familiar scripting techniques with similarities for other creative arts teams such as comedy and drama writing teams. Software programs enable co-writing with editing, comments, automatic refreshes, distinctive font colours to trace the work of different authors, and the delights of automated referencing with links to EndNote, for example. Other programs like talk to text programs such as Dragon are increasingly enabling the inclusion of oral oriented cultures to participate in `written or published' works.

Storytelling and story making are participatory and collaborative research practices that must be included here as core to collaborative writing into action research. Throughout the text, personal narratives from each of the six collaborators form part of our collective story. Narrative community practice and narrative therapy, which emerged from the work of Australian and New Zealand social workers David and Cheryl White and David Epston and well housed at the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, is a form of potentially transformative storytelling and storymaking that demonstrates a learning from and respect for First Nations wisdoms and ways (Wingard, Johnson, & Drahm-Butler, 2015).

To some extent we have employed elements from each of these resources. Whitehead's Living Theory (Whitehead, 1989) and Wadsworth (2010) resonate with many of the intentions and emerging characteristics of this effort. Whitehead's proposal is that theorisation blocks the living form of practice, which must be allowed to flourish to allow continuous learning and improvement in inquiry. "How do I improve my practice?" is the high-level question guiding this approach, enabling theory to emerge from practice rather than be applied to it. Whitehead values first person as the primary voice, noting that self-reflection is content rich not poor as objectivism would require. Being aware of values becomes explanations of reasons for action in an action research environment: "a description and explanation of practice which is part of the living form of the practice itself". Our reviewers drew our attention to Flood and Romm's (2018) triple loop learning, and as we reflected on the worth of including this reference, we concluded that overall, we felt we had experienced a form of triple loop learning, as evidenced in the way in which we have written this paper.

Conclusions

> Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behaviour is
> not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999, p. xxv, cited
> in Reason, 2006, p. 188)

Co-writing this paper provided the impetus for us to take a moment and examine what was happening for us as individuals through the interconnectivity of being part of a group that was concentrating on a specific task. The experience has helped us as action researchers to critically reflect on our practices: do we do what our literature says we do? Do we actually collaborate? And as we explore our practice, how do we collaborate? And if we speak from a collective voice – our 'we" – how have we arrived at this standpoint? Having adopted the first-person plural, what effect is it having on our reflective and action dimensions of writing? It is these elements of the taken-for-granted act of collaboratively writing to produce this journal article that resonate

with a parallel research movement of practice-led inquiry (Grey, 1996).

Prior to this phase, actions of delivering on our ALARA research project had dominated. Focusing on the outcomes of research projects is a common limitation of traditional research that action research aims to challenge through capturing learning and change throughout the process. Without the pause to reflect, to start with where we are now, the transformation within can be overlooked, losing the opportunity for growth and insights for ourselves, the group and the wider action research audience. We are being drawn to the notion of "living life as an inquiry" where how we live becomes inseparable from the underpinning principles of action research and the knowledge it creates, "that unfolding experience as it is lived within a life is the primary locus of how relevant knowledge can be derived" (Gearty & Marshall, 2020, p. 22).

In engaging on this critical examination of early stages of collaborative writing, this small group of action researchers has experienced inherent tensions between manifesting a methodology that is inclusive, collaborative and empowering and a sense of comfort with 'our own way of knowing and doing'. While leading projects with very different groups of people in both organisations and communities, we can develop a discourse that is perpetuated in our own practice as AR facilitators and/or co-inquirers. Taking the challenge of joining an unfamiliar group has opened up the opportunity to create an unease that is a stimulus to examine our own practices more deeply: to not provide proof but create new questions.

Freire (1998) talks about the hope that authentic engagement and involvement lead to empowerment. The concept of conscientization or critical consciousness to which his hopes for marginalized and oppressed peoples are more than Marxist or Gramscian phrases. Like feminist approaches they signify an awareness of oppression in our society and the work or action that is required to address all the social and political implications of oppression and discriminations. Action research ultimately aims for empowerment, transformation and greater harmony amongst

the diversity of human and all sentient beings and their environments – beginning with ourselves.

> The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard, 1979 cited in Reason, 2005)

A final and important point relates to the value of collaborative research and writing endeavours as being an opportunity to be both teacher and learner with each other. This is well articulated by Jo-Anne Kelder (Heinrich, E., Hill, G., Kelder, J-A. & Picard, M., 2021), a participant in a different collaborative project who speaks to the value of collaboration for undertaking research writing:

> The other thing, I think, for beginning researchers, is the huge value of being involved in research projects with people who are more experienced than you. So, the mentoring opportunity is also quite high. And for more experienced researchers, the joy that you can have in helping a novice researcher to extend and grow their capabilities is very significant and, I would argue, good for you, as well. It keeps your research fresh and invigorated as well. So, I think collaboration is one of those things that takes time, takes effort. International collaboration has its additional layers of complexity and difficulty, but the benefit is very real. And it's not just in terms of the quality of research that you produce, but it's also the quality of the relationships and the learning experiences that are engendered through engaging with each other.

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Biographies

Dr Diana Austin is a senior lecturer in midwifery at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. She completed her doctorate, through Auckland University of Technology in 2017, using action research to develop a support tool for health professionals following a critical incident. This ignited a passion for action research as a methodology to bring about change in healthcare. She is currently part of a research team exploring the 'ah ha' moments in understanding action research with the aim of enhancing the education of new researchers in the future.

Email: diana4austin@gmail.com

Dr Yedida Bessemer is an adjunct faculty at the University of Charleston, West Virginia, at the Graduate Strategic Leadership Program. She conducted an action research study for her doctoral project focused on developing and improving data literacy among online faculty through professional learning communities. Her teaching and leading diverse groups in different states and abroad for two and a half decades have given her unique professional and educational experiences and opportunities as an educator and a learner. Dr Bessemer sees herself as a change agent dedicated to promoting a holistic, relational approach to education through fostering positive relationships, developing trust, effective communication, and collaboration.

Contact: yedidabessemer@gmail.com

Dr Susan Goff is a participatory action research practitioner and theorist. She specialises in social ecology fields, with particular interest in cross-cultural methodologies with First Nations peoples in Australia. Susan has been actively involved in ALARA since 1996 variously as Board member, President, Editor of the journal and now Publications Coordinator. Following 23 years as Director of action research consultancy, CultureShift Pty Ltd, she is

currently working in policy research for the Commonwealth government.

Contact: susan.goff@bigpond.com

Geof Hill (Geof@bigpond.com) is the principal consultant/founder of *the Investigative Practitioner*, a consultancy supporting professionals investigating their practice. Geof is also the initiator of *The Research Supervisor's friend*, a Wordpress blog (https://supervisorsfriend.wordpress.com) and an Editor for ASRHE (Advancing Scholarship and Research in Higher Education) (https://asrhe.org).

Geof's training in the 1980s as a Work Study analyst provided the foundation for his later consultancies in Business, Health, Education and Mining and two substantial academic positions at Queensland (Australia) University of Technology and Birmingham City (U.K) University, both related to professional development for research supervisors.

Dr Elizabeth Orr is a committed Indigenous ally and action researcher. Liz has worked alongside diverse community based projects to improve prevention strategies and service responses for women and children affected by all forms of violence, inequality and exclusion (e.g. racism, poverty). She was a recipient of a Lowitja Institute PhD scholarship for her thesis `Stories of Good Practice from Aboriginal Hospital Liaison Officers and Social Workers in Hospitals in Victoria', which was awarded the Nancy Millis medal at La Trobe University in 2018.

lizorr@iinet.net.au
https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Elizabeth_Orr

Dr Vicki Vaartjes is an international development consultant specialising in systemic design, collaborative practice, inclusion and partnerships as pathways to achieving sustainable development through the Australian aid program. Vicki is an experienced program and organisational leader and action researcher, and has delivered complex organisation and human resource development projects in Australia, Asia and the Pacific spanning diverse sectors. She has been engaged with ALARA since

1998, with three publications, various conference presentations and volunteer support including as Australasian Vice President. Vicki is currently Director Scholarships for Tetra Tech International Development, responsible for business development and improvement strategies across a portfolio of educational, fellowship and scholarships programs managed by Tetra Tech.

Unseen students: Exploring rural young adults' college and career decision-making experiences through action research approaches

Brook Batch, Noah Douglas, Mackenzie Roth, Rebecca Allen, Alex Nakonechnyi and Jackie Roberts

Abstract

Rural young adults' college decision-making experiences are impacted by challenges such as financial barriers, limited academic opportunities, and sources of social capital. This participatory action research project highlights the experiences of five rural young adults and their peers in the Midwestern United States. Our research team collected information through narrative reflections, surveys, and interviews. Findings suggest students wanted to attend college to advance their future careers, struggled when applying for financial aid, and relied on their parents for assistance. The challenges rural students face while making college and career plans are reduced when these students have a support network consisting of their parents, high school guidance counselors and teachers, and college admissions counselors. As such, our research group developed specific action items aimed at strengthen rural young adults' pathways to college.

Key words: Rural students, college access, social capital, action research, participatory action research

What is known about the topic?

Students from rural areas encounter a series of potential overlapping challenges when making college and career decisions, such as limited academic opportunities, perceived and felt financial constraints, varying levels of support from their families and high schools, and social ties within their communities.

What does this paper add?

The paper adds to the larger body of research on rural student college access by highlighting additional strategies and initiatives to provide sources of social capital to rural communities. The paper also provides ideas on how to use technology as a way to involve rural students in improving college access in their communities.

Who will benefit from its content?

This paper has the potential to impact rural communities, secondary schools in rural areas, and colleges and universities serving rural communities. The paper may also inform future research on rural student college access.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

- The study provides examples of virtual data collection and data analysis strategies that can be used in AR
- The study highlights the beginning stages of an ongoing project utilizing participatory action research approaches

> I think that being from a smaller school with low funding out in the country, those of us [students] that aspire to go to college in the first place, often feel uneasy about where to go, because we seek opportunities that weren't seen as accessible to us.
>
> — Andrew (pseudonym), narrative reflection

Earning an undergraduate degree is thought to offer degree earners several social and financial benefits (Chan, 2016). However, literature suggests educational policies, college recruitment initiatives, and governmental funding efforts in the United States often overlook students in rural America as more attention and resources have been given to urban and underrepresented minority students (Dobson, 2018; Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018; McDonough, Gildersleeve & Jarsky, 2010). Rural students are those living in areas the United States' Census Bureau (n.d., para.6) classifies as being "any population, housing, or

territory NOT in an urban area." Because of the disparities in educational and economic resource distribution, rural students like Andrew might be more impacted by financial barriers than urban students (Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018). Furthermore, rural young adults may experience difficulties accessing college preparation resources like college entrance exam study materials and financial aid information, and struggle with leaving tight-knit rural communities to pursue a bachelor's degree (Peterson, 2020). While the subject of rural students' college access is not an emerging field, more work is yet to be done to explore the potential barriers rural young adults face to better understand their college and career decisions (Stone, 2017).

When addressing complex issues involving the unique experiences of a specific population, it is beneficial to hear from the individuals most affected by a particular issue. In this study, we worked directly with rural young adults to gain insight on their college decision-making processes. Two research questions guided the research: 1) What factors may have influenced rural young adults' decisions to enroll in higher education courses or enter the workforce after high school graduation in our local context? 2) What are the perceived barriers rural young adults experience throughout the college enrollment process?

The article begins with a review of the structural and relational factors influencing rural young adults' future college or career decisions, and then moves to a discussion of survey and interview findings that suggest students wanted to attend college to advance their future careers, experienced challenges with applying for financial aid, and were most reliant on their parents for assistance. Ultimately, we argue that the challenges and barriers rural young adults face while making post-high school graduation plans can be reduced if a support network consisting of parents, high school guidance counselors and teachers, and college admissions counselors is in place. As such, these support teams would contribute to improving college access for unseen students.

Literature review

Rural students face an overlapping series of potential challenges including limited academic opportunities, financial barriers, level of support from family and high schools, and social ties in rural communities.

Limited academic opportunities

Rural young adults may choose to attend a university because the offered programs are thought to lead to successful careers or because the cost of education at a particular institution seems more affordable than other colleges and universities (Cox et al., 2014). Other young rural adults may be more inclined to make college and career decisions based on what they are familiar with, such as attending a college or university close to home or pursuing career paths similar to those of their parents (Cox et al., 2014). Moreover, rural students may have experienced limited class offerings in their schools. For instance, rural students may have fewer advanced placement and college credit courses, as well as, extracurricular activities compared to urban schools (Nelson, 2019).

Rural students may receive less post-high school graduation college and career support; rural high school guidance counselors are often responsible for large numbers of students, and thus, may be unable to provide individualized college and career support for each student (Rutter et al., 2020). That being said, rural students seem to find interactions with higher education admissions counselors and recruiters helpful (Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner, 2015).

Financial barriers

For many rural and first-generation students, the choice between attending college or starting a career directly after high school graduation may be dependent on available financial resources (Nelson, 2019; Azmitia et al., 2018; Koricich, 2014). Some rural students may believe they cannot attend college because of their available finances (Nelson, 2019). Rural students may also perceive

attending a two-year college as the more affordable option, though this decision may not save them money in the long-run or bring desired career outcomes (Koricich, Chen & Hughes, 2018). Nonetheless, rural students' college enrollment decisions seem to stem from a desire to enter into career fields that will lead to financial security (Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner, 2015; Cox et al., 2014).

Level of support from family and high schools

Several studies suggest students may experience varying levels of parental support, or lack thereof, which can greatly impact rural and first-generation student college enrollment decisions (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Agger, Meece & Byun, 2018; Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner, 2015). Additionally, while many parents want and encourage their children, some parents, typically those who have not attended college themselves, many not be equipped to help their children enroll in college (Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner, 2015). Many of these parents of first-generation students relied on the support of high school guidance counselors, though these rural counselors are often overworked (Rutter et al., 2020; Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Social ties in rural communities

It may be important for rural students to stay in their communities as the outflow of young professionals may be detrimental to the social and economic well-being of the area (Cox et al., 2014; Carr & Kefalas, 2009). Rural adolescents themselves often have mixed feelings towards leaving their communities to pursue higher education or enter the workforce (Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014). Some rural adolescents perceive leaving their hometowns as the best or only option for their futures, while others see rural areas as having more opportunities; rural students tend to migrate accordingly (Cox et al., 2014; Agger, Meece & Byun, 2018; Marré, 2017).

Methodology

As previously stated in the literature review, rural students may be impacted by limited academic opportunity, financial constraints, the level of support received from family and high schools, and a desire to remain close to home. The individual experiences of students are complex, and there are no easy answers to understanding what combination of challenges influence rural students' post-graduation decision-making processes. However, learning from the experiences of rural students is an essential part of identifying ways to make college more accessible for all populations. Given these needs, our study aims to identify ways our university can serve as a source of social capital for rural communities in our area.

Participatory action research

Our project takes a participatory action research (PAR) approach (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2013; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The underlying foundations of PAR hold that collaborators share research responsibilities and ownership, aim to analyze and address problems or issues felt by a particular group or population, and engage the affected community in brining change (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007, p. 273). We chose to use PAR because this approach relies on collaboration and participation that "moves from phases of passive participation to more interactive participation and finally to self-mobilization," (Pant, 2014, p. 584). Within the context of our study, university faculty and staff provided the research knowledge needed to provide a study framework, while the student co-researchers' participation, understanding of the research process, and confidence with conducting research increased.

Because college access is a complex issue that affects communities in different ways, using PAR in our study will not solve the global problem of college access, but rather give us a better understanding of how we can address the problem in our local context. Participatory action research involves cycles of planning action, performing the action, observing the action, and reflecting

on the action until meaningful solutions are found (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2007, p. 276). The present study presents the process and findings of our first PAR cycle.

Setting

The impetus for this study was that educational theory and our own empirical experience show that rural students often lack social capital. Namely, Stanton-Salazar (2011, p. 1094) defines social capital as "forms of institutional support," such as the resources and encouragement provided by high school guidance counselors and teachers, as well as college admission staff and faculty, that may provide rural young adults with the tools and motivation needed to accomplish their personal and future occupational goals. While our university, a small, private Catholic university is located in the suburban Midwestern United States, many of the surrounding communities within 100 miles of the University's campus are rural. In the spring of 2020, our university received a five-year scholarship grant funded by the State's Department of Higher Education for undergraduate students studying computer science. Making our new program accessible to rural students was at the forefront of our thinking. Perhaps, rural students themselves know what the best means of accessing social capital will be. Therefore, our research group consisted of staff, faculty, and students.

Working on this project led to conversations with our student co-researchers about their postsecondary decision-making experiences, which sparked our interest in better understanding the experiences of rural young adults to improve the way we approach and serve surrounding rural communities throughout the college recruitment and enrollment process. This study will equip rural communities with valuable resources—our current student co-researchers and future rural students who are gaining a research-based education and creating informational resources for students.

Participants, data collection, and analysis

The following five young adults served as the project's main collaborators and informants (pseudonyms used):

Jack graduated from a rural high school in the Midwest with a graduating class of less than 80 students during the 2019-2020 academic year. He lived in a community with an estimated total population of 858 people (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Jack chose to take a gap year after graduating from high school, and planned to attend college in the future. At the time of his interview, Jack wanted to enter a career that involved computer science before he enrolled at a college or university.

Hannah graduated from the same high school as Jack during the 2019-2020 academic year, and lived in the same rural community. Hannah planned to start her first semester at a mid-sized public university and study nursing. Hannah's deep-rooted desire to help others was what motivated her to attend college.

Olivia graduated from an online public school during the 2018-2019 academic year. She lived in a Midwestern community with an estimated total population of 240 people (United States Census Bureau, 2020). At the time of the interview, Olivia had completed her first year as a business major at a public university located in a metropolitan area. She wanted to pursue an undergraduate degree to gain professional skills before entering the workforce.

Andrew graduated from the same rural high school as Jack and Hannah during the 2019-2020 academic year, and lived in the same community. At the time of the interview, he was enrolled in courses for the 2020-2021 school year at a small, private Catholic university located in the Midwestern United States, and was pursuing a double major in computer science with a concentration in natural language processing and liberal arts. Neither of Andrew's parents earned college-level degrees, but were supportive of Andrew during the college enrollment process. Andrew had always valued education, and intended to become an educator.

Lauren graduated from a rural high school in the Midwestern United States with a graduating class of 164 students during the 2019-2020 academic year. She lived in a community with an estimated total population of 5,042 people (United States Census Bureau, 2020). At the time of the interview, she was enrolled in the same small, private Catholic university as Andrew, and was pursuing a double major in computer science with a concentration in natural language processing and biomedical sciences. Lauren's plans included attending graduate school in order to become a physical therapist.

The aforementioned five young adults served as a core group of student co-researchers. The mandated and suggested social distancing guidelines associated with the coronavirus pandemic (Bailey & Hess, 2020) caused us to move our research efforts online. Our team of student co-researchers, faculty, and university research staff met biweekly on Zoom during the course of the research project to collaborate, discuss and analyze findings, and plan future actions.

To begin, two student co-researchers (Andrew and Lauren) wrote brief narrative reflections (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Toledano & Anderson, 2020) describing their experiences with making post-high school graduation decisions, and noting any challenges they faced while applying to college. Based on what we learned from the narrative reflections, our team collaboratively created survey questions using a cross-sectional survey design to collect data on the perspectives and experiences of rural young adults as they chose a college or career path after high school graduation (Creswell, 2015).

The survey asked quantitative questions and open-ended questions. The student co-researchers piloted the survey, and the team modified the survey questions based on their feedback. The survey was administered online through QualtricsXM (Qualtrics, 2020). Using snowball sampling, (Creswell, 2015; Goodman, 1961) the student co-researchers shared the survey link with several of their peers, with the idea that these external informants may be more comfortable participating in a project their peers are co-

leading. Our team asked these young adults to take the survey but offered no incentives. The survey asked eleven questions on the young adults' perceived rurality status and level of paternal and school staff support during the college decision-making process, college enrollment status, as well as their future career aspirations and parents' education level. The final survey question gave young adults the opportunity to provide their contact information if they would be willing to share more about their experiences. Twenty-one young adults took the survey, though six surveys were not completed. Amongst the young adults that disclosed their genders, males and females were equally represented. Additionally, three-quarters of the young adults who provided residence information self-identified as having lived in a rural area, while the remainder came from suburban settings. The team did not collect information on the young adults' race and ethnicity. Table 1 summarizes the results of the survey respondents' demographic information.

Demographic Characteristic	n	%
Identified as female	3	14
Identified as male	3	14
Did not disclose gender	15	72
Lived in a rural area (country)	12	57
Lived in a suburban area (outside of a city, but not in the country)	4	19
Did not respond to question about home location	5	24

Table 1. Survey Respondent Demographics

Because the opened-ended survey questions earned vague responses, our team developed follow-up interview questions. Five young adults had shared their contact information at the end of the survey and were contacted by our team. Our team discussed ethical interview practices (Creswell, 2015). Before the interviews began, the interviewer(s) asked participants if the session could be

recorded. If a participant did not want to be recorded, the interviewer(s) took detailed notes instead. Our team facilitated and recorded all but one interview over Zoom. The first author interviewed Andrew and Lauren. Andrew and a university staff member conducted three interviews together. Our team transcribed the interviews on Temi (Temi, 2020), an audio transcription service.

 Our team analyzed these transcripts through participatory thematic analysis, which enables groups of researchers to collaborate during qualitative data analysis to ensure results are interpreted consistently and accurately (Jackson, 2008). Because we were not able to meet in-person due to strict social distancing guidelines in place at the time of research, the participatory thematic analysis was conducted on Padlet, an online sticky note platform (Padlet, 2020). While, the initial data collection phase lasted for about two months, we expect the process of refining our data collection approaches, planning actions, performing actions, observing and analyzing action and data, and reflecting on our results to be ongoing.

Findings and discussion

Our team first developed a comprehensive understanding of students' reasons and motivations for attending college. Then, our team identified potential barriers to students' success in reaching these goals. Finally, we gained a better of understanding of how existing supports and social capital resources fail and succeed in meeting students' needs.

Students' reasons and motivations for attending college

In our survey, we asked the young adults to share the top two-to-three reasons why they choose to attend college. Over half of responses revolved around attending college to increase students' future earning potential, or because students wanted to enter fields that require a bachelor's degree, such as health professions and education. As previously mentioned, though Jack was not enrolled in college courses at the time of his interview, he believed that a

college degree would expand his potential earning outcomes, "with a college degree, I'm more likely to succeed." Hannah, Andrew, and Lauren's decision to attend college was a natural one, as they wanted to enter career fields that require high-level degrees. Hannah shared, "I always knew that I was going to go into the health profession…so other than that, I didn't really…look at the college...atmosphere…clubs and activities…I just focused on the nursing program." Likewise, Andrew was motivated to attend college because of the career field he wants to enter:

> "I was definitely interested in a future career in like education, and I realized that there wasn't much of a way I was going to be able to achieve that at all if I didn't go to college. Higher education…wasn't an option…I was gonna do it one way or another."

Similar to Andrew, Lauren shared, "I wanted to better my learning, my education, and then I know…college is going to be better for a job in the future. And, I ultimately, I want to go into the medical field…so you kind of have to for that." For Olivia, however, attending college allows her to further her education while also exploring potential career options. She told us she enrolled at her college because, "I was not ready to work a full-time job…so getting educated, you know, feel[s] like it's just something you're supposed to do."

The young adults understood attending college would be a necessary step in allowing them to achieve their future career goals. The focus on practical reasons for attending college aligns with findings reported by Cox et al. (2014). However, students like Olivia, who value education, but are not sure what to study, may require additional support. Our research team is exploring ways to use technology to help young adults select their majors and career paths.

Potential barriers to students' obtainment of their academic and career goals

Our team identified the following potential barriers to students' success in reaching their academic and career goals: limited

intuitional and academic resources, available finances and
financial aid, and the impact of COVID-19.

Limited institutional and academic resources

Both Andrew and Lauren mentioned their high schools' Advanced
Placement (AP) and dual credit programs. Andrew shared that an
AP course he wanted to take in high school was canceled due to a
lack of participants. Now that he is enrolled in a dual major
program at his university, Andrew said, "I wish they offered a few
more [AP courses] because the credit would be useful." Lauren's
high school offered a dual credit program where students were
able to earn an Associate's degree before graduating high school.
Lauren realized how helpful participating in this program was
when she began touring colleges and "there is a lot of kids who
would ask questions and I was like, I kinda already know the
answer to that [because of the college courses]." On the other hand,
Jack, Hannah, and Andrew attended a high school that did not
offer college preparation or dual credit courses. All three young
adults expressed an interest in having a course that would provide
more instruction on how students can fill out the Common
Application and apply for the FASFA and other sources of
financial aid. Furthermore, Jack expressed an interest in hearing
stories from individuals with diverse college decision-making
experiences, "I want to see an average guy like me who can show
me…I want some guy who went at the last moment with not the
best scores, but was still successful."

The young adults' perceptions of the benefits or disadvantages that
may be associated with rural high school education varied. Jack
felt that small class sizes gave him, "a better opportunity" as he felt
he may have had a more personalized connection with his teachers
than students from larger schools. Hannah and Andrew had mixed
feelings about their school's small class sizes. Though she liked her
high school, Hannah said, "I definitely feel like I'm at a
disadvantage because our school was so small…I mean, at a bigger
school, you definitely have resources. Like you might have a tutor
that knows people or your guidance counselor might know certain
people to get you ahead." Andrew originally shared in Jack's

positivity towards their high school's small class sizes, but changed his opinion. He said, "I felt like colleges wouldn't have, uh, looked at me or paid me much attention as maybe a [student from] a larger school with a bigger curriculum and everything else." Likewise, Lauren believed that her school was not visited by as many college recruiters compared to urban high schools, "I feel like schools [colleges] will go to bigger cities…So not as many schools may come [to her high school]." Besides not having as many colleges visit her school, Lauren said, "I feel like we overall did have the same opportunity as everyone else."

Available finances and financial aid

Most survey participants indicated that available finances and the high costs of higher education largely influenced their decision to attend college. Of the eleven participants who answered this question, over 80% shared the financial support they were offered positively impacted their decision to enroll at a particular college. When asked to share why he or she did not enroll in college courses, one young adult shared, "I am unsure [of] what I want to do in life. I don't want to put a lot of money into college and decided not to go." All of the young adults we interviewed echoed this student's financial concerns. Jack wanted to go to college, but he decided to take a gap year because he was unsure about his future career plans, "I don't want to jump into college, spend all that money, then waste it. I want to do something that I truly enjoy and see myself doing in the future." Andrew knew that he needed to attend college in order to become an educator, however, the costs of tuition and the confusion he felt towards completing financial aid applications, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FASFA), caused him a great deal of stress:

> "I was sweating a lot over the money…I wasn't really sure how the…FASFA worked…I didn't know if I would really get the desired amount. I didn't know if [the] scholarships were what they [college financial aid packages] said they were."

The FASFA application process also confused Hannah, Lauren, and Olivia. Hannah's college decision was largely impacted by

tuition costs and the financial aid packages she was offered. Though the cost of tuition at the university "was still like super cheap and it [the program] was best for me…financial aid had [played] a big factor in it [her decision]." Still, the amount of financial aid Hannah received from her college "was a disappointment." The cost of tuition was a big factor for Lauren as she plans to attend graduate school. She applied to several scholarship opportunities, which involved writing essays and attending single or group interviews. Though she was grateful for these opportunities, Lauren shared her frustrations when she was interviewed and "felt like I knew who was going to get this scholarship…then I was like, 'Oh, this, this, school is going to be too expensive now.'" Olivia explained that she is paying for college on her own, and had to pay more money out-of-pocket because she relied on her school's inaccurate financial aid estimator:

> "They like factor in loans and stuff that you have to apply for. And they factor in this work study thing, which it looks like you're going to get the money, but you actually have to get a job on campus to then get the money. And it's hard to get a job on campus. So, I ended up not getting that money….which I wasn't prepared for."

Students' financial concerns and difficulties appear to be consistent with the literature previously mentioned (Rutter et al., 2020; Nelson, 2019; Azmitia et al., 2018). Several governmental initiatives and postsecondary institutions in the US have made efforts to provide rural young adults with more financial aid opportunities in the past (Koricich, 2014). However, as many young adults rely on paternal support while completing financial aid paperwork, it may be beneficial to explore alternative ways to present college tuition and financial aid information to parents and their students.

Impacts of COVID-19

The recent coronavirus outbreak seemed to present additional challenges for several rural young adults. In the survey, a couple young adults listed "corona" and "online classes" as one of the top two reasons why they chose not to enroll in college during the

2020-2021 academic year. Because we received these answers, we decided to ask the students we interviewed if and how COVID-19 may have impacted their college decision process. For Jack, the thought of living on a college campus and having to take classes online "would be pointless," and contributed to his decision to take a gap year. Olivia finished her second semester of college at the time when many colleges and universities in the U.S. made the quick shift to remote learning in order to decrease the spread of the coronavirus. Coming from an online public school background, Olivia preferred remote learning to face-to-face lectures, "It [the switch to online learning] didn't really change anything for me. Honestly, I kinda liked it a little better because the days were shorter."

Though the coronavirus outbreak did not dramatically alter Hannah, Andrew, and Lauren's decision to attend college, they were concerned about how the virus would affect their transition to campus life. Both Andrew and Lauren were concerned that social distancing might limit their opportunities to meet new people. Lauren said, "I know I'm going to need the education…it's more sad…I don't get to meet all the people as much…I'm not going to have much social interaction cause I feel like nobody knows each other over Zoom." Likewise, Andrew shared that he was expecting a different college experience than he would likely get:

> "I was looking forward to a more traditional entrance into college….I'm at least happy that I can be on campus still…if I was stuck at home, taking online courses…I might have looked into trying to take a skip year."

As seen through Hannah, Olivia, Andrew, and Lauren's experiences, the coronavirus pandemic did not dissuade them from attending college, but made them question their ability to meet people while being socially distant on campus and attending virtual lectures. We are looking for ways to implement creative uses of technology into virtual lectures at our university as a way to encourage students to engage with both the course material as well as their classmates.

Existing sources of student support and social capital resources

Our team learned more about the possible sources of support students often rely on during the transition from secondary graduation to college or a career, as well as how existing forms of social capital aid or fail in meeting students' needs. The sources of support and social capital we identified are: high school administrative staff and teachers, parents, peers, college administration counselors and faculty, and rural communities. Each of the sources of support was rated by respondents on 1 to 5 Likert-scale with 1 being the lowest possible score and 5 being the highest possible score. The summary of the young adults' responses to the Likert-scale questions are provided in Table 2.

Source of Support	n of Responses	Score
High School Guidance Counselors	15	2.93
High School Teachers	15	3.07
Parents	16	3.88
Peers	16	3.88

Table 2. Rural Young Adults' Level of Support during the College Decision Making Process

Support from high school administrative staff and teachers

Responses on the helpfulness of high school administrators, such as guidance counselors, and teachers differed. The survey asked participants to indicate the level of support they received from their high school guidance counselor(s) and teacher(s) as they decided what to do after high school graduation. Both questions received responses from fifteen participants. The average amount of students' perceived help from their high school guidance counselor was 3.07, while the average amount of help received

from teachers was 2.93. These survey results may suggest that participants found their guidance counselor(s) relatively helpful, however, in another open-ended survey question that asked participants to share two or three factors that would have made their post-high school graduate college and career decisions easier, one respondent wrote, "A better guidance counselor." Yet, the participant did not provide examples of the ways in which his or her guidance counselor could have provided better support throughout the transition from high school towards his or her next step. Hannah, Andrew and Lauren were grateful for the support they received from their guidance counselors, however, they mentioned wishing they could have had even more support. Hannah and Andrew both attended a small, rural high school that only had one guidance counselor. Hannah shared, "Our guidance counselor was helpful if you went to her, but she never like reached out and be like, 'Hey, did you get this done?' which would have been a lot more helpful, but I mean, I got through it." When he began the college application process, Andrew found the process difficult. He "had to do a bit of prying around," and ended up getting assistance from both his high school guidance counselor and college admission counselors to determine the information he needed to provide in order to apply to college and complete the FASFA (Federal Student Aid: an Office of the U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Lauren was the only young adult who mentioned receiving encouragement and support of a specific teacher. She said, "I did have a teacher I was pretty close with at [her high school] for, in talking with him and through all of his experiences, that kind of helped me a lot." For Lauren, conversations with this teacher helped her determine which educational path she would like pursue in college.

Support from parents

 Our survey asked rural young adults to indicate the level of parental support they felt they received during the college and career decision-making experience. Of the twenty-one young adults surveyed, sixteen responded to this question; the average level of felt support from parents was 3.88. Answering an open-ended survey question that asked participants to identify the main

reasons they choose to attend college, one first-generation participant wrote, "My parents do not want me to be like them—they want me to get a degree." All of the interviewed young adults shared that their parents provided some form of support throughout their post-high school graduation college and career decision-making experiences, whether it be through providing advice and encouragement, or helping with college enrollment and financial aid paperwork. Even though Jack was not enrolled in college courses at the time of his interview, the encouragement he received from his parent impacted his decision to attend college later on, and influenced his perception of how higher education may expand career opportunities. He shared, "My dad really pushed me to go. Before I was thinking I could do what I wanted without college, but now I'm more pro-college because with a college degree, I'm more likely to succeed."

Hannah and Lauren both stressed how hearing advice from their parents aided in their college selection decisions, and also suggested ways in which college could serve as an opportunity for personal growth. Lauren described how her parents encouraged her to help overcome her shyness by, "talking to people more," as well as, taking "every opportunity that you have to do something." While advice from parents and friends can be helpful for some rural young adults, it could also cause confusion for others. For instance, Hannah sometimes struggled with determining what she should do with the well-meaning comments she received from her loved-ones, "I don't really know what I'm going to do, but…I've had different people jabbing in my ears. So many different things about what a good college experience is." Hannah, Andrew, and Olivia shared that their parents assisted them with deciding which colleges to apply to, and helped them complete paperwork during the admission and enrollment processes, as well as applying for financial aid. Andrew, a first generation post-secondary education student, told the first author that despite not going to college themselves, during the college enrollment process his parents, "were probably the most supportive…even though it's them…helping me keep track of everything that I'm going to need to do." Because of this, it may be helpful to create ways of

simplifying the college enrollment and financial aid application process because parents serve as a major source of support for students during these processes (Rutter et al., 2020).

Support from peers

Several rural young adults received support and encouragement from peers during their post-high school graduation college and career decision-making experiences. The survey asked rural young adults to indicate the level of support they felt they received from their peers during the college and career decision-making experience. Sixteen out of twenty-one young adults responded to this question. The average level of felt support from peers was 3.88. Jack shared that "my friends [and family] would like me to go to college, they want me to go." Rural youth were also encouraged to apply to certain institutions of higher education based on information they received from peers. Andrew initially heard about the small university he would eventually attend from a friend that had applied there.

Support from college admission counselors and faculty

Our survey results indicate approximately 45% of young adults were positively impacted by college admissions counselors, and 36% of young adults' decision to attend the college they selected were positively impacted by the faculty members at their selected universities. Andrew eventually enrolled at the first college he toured. He told us personalized communications he received from the college's admission counselors, "made me feel like, you know, the school wanted me rather than just a large public institution sent me those…emails that…they kind of send everybody." Conversely, Olivia had difficulties connecting with staff at the university she is attending. When she had questions, Olivia called staff at her university, but she "got tossed around on the phone a lot and people said they would call me back, but they never called me back." She added, "I didn't get answers until I was face-to-face with them. So it would have been nice if someone would have replied to an email or returned a phone call."

Our conversations with the young adults may suggest rural students want individualized communication and assistance from

college enrollment staff and other members of the campus community. While focusing outreach and recruitment efforts may be feasible for some institutions, it may not make sense for others. As such, institutions of higher education will need to determine what works for them and the rural communities they aim to serve.

Rural communities

Though their communities offered varying degrees of social capital, the young adults seemed interested in staying close to home during and after college. For Hannah, Andrew, and Lauren, choosing a college located close to home was important. Both Hannah and Lauren planned to stay at home during their first year at their respective universities. The decision to commute was a difficult one for Lauren, who described herself as a person who likes being close to home. She shared, "My whole family was like, you need to go away, you know, break yourself away from home." Though her family encouraged her to live on campus, Lauren decided commuting to campus would save money and allow her to attend her younger brother's sporting events. Likewise, Hannah told us one of the major factors influencing her decision to attend her college was its closeness to home, "It's like a 45 [minute] to an hour drive from my house." While Lauren and Hannah wanted to commute during college, Olivia and Andrew wanted to live on campus. Nonetheless, Olivia mentioned liking her college because being two hours away from her hometown, her university was, "Far away from home, but not too far."

Andrew and Olivia seemed the most eager to leave their hometowns for either work or to experience a new locale. This desire to leave one's hometown is consistent with a study conducted by Moon and Bouchey (2019) that found many rural students feel pressured to move to less rural areas. Though, rural students' desire to leave their hometowns to earn higher degrees may in fact increase a rural communities' level of social capital when young adults return (Petrin, Schafft & Meece, 2014).

Reflection and actions

Having collected and analyzed the data, our team met to discuss the next steps. Namely, we developed specific action items aimed at addressing the key problems we identified: college information navigation, providing support to rural high school teachers, creating information packages for parents, and growing social networks. Different team members identified distinct steps that resonated with their experiences, interests, and skills. The staff and faculty on our research team have been working with the student co-researchers to provide them with the working hours and support needed to pursue these initiatives. Our team is currently working together to implement these steps. Additional iterations of the action research cycle will follow the full implementation of these actions.

College information navigation

Our team identified several strategies to improve students' ability to assess information about our University, academic programs, and financial aid opportunities. In partnership with a school dean at our University and the admissions department, we are creating web page-based campaigns to send to students based on their interests. Through this platform, we will be able to send students and their parents step-by-step instructions on how to apply for financial aid. Our rural student co-researchers are recording a video series for rural students on why they chose to attend college, how they approach their assignments, and other subjects.

High school teacher outreach

Our team also identified ways we could provide support to high school teachers, as students informally relied on teachers for advice. Two student co-researchers compiled a list of teachers from rural high schools in our area. Our team's faculty member will collaborate with the Admission's Department to reach out to these teachers, volunteering to speak about the programs our University offers.

Information packets for parents

After reviewing the data on students' experiences with the financial aid application process, as well as students' reliance on their parents to provide assistance, one student co-researcher wanted to start a parent information initiative. This student is leading the creation of informative videos and information packets to send to parents seeking to help their kids through the college application and financial aid process.

Growing social networks

As illustrated through our findings, many rural students want to be in close communities. Transitioning into college-life can be challenging for students, especially when beginning college during a pandemic. Andrew became interested in revamping our University's closed-social media app to increase students' opportunities to meet their peers virtually. He has been working with our app development team to implement some of his ideas on how to make it easier for students to connect with their peers.

As aforementioned, we intend for this research project to be ongoing. Our next step will be to share our results with the admissions team at our institution. We would like to collaborate with rural high schools in our area to explore the barriers rural students may experience, and determine ways our institution can refine our efforts to serve these communities. We found that rural students often relied on support and advice from high school teachers, so we intend to make personalized connections with teachers in our area. Our rural student co-researches plan to make videos and handouts for rural parents who want to help their children through the college and financial aid application process.

Conclusion

As we are in the beginning stages of our study to improve rural young adults' college access, this paper discusses the process of seeking to understand the problem through collecting and analyzing initial data, reflecting on our findings, and implementing action steps. As such, our paper presents an

emerging example of how institutions of higher education in urban areas can utilize their existing resources to support rural students in gaining improved access to higher education. Because rural young adults seem to rely on support teams comprised of parents, high school administrative staff and teachers, and admission and financial aid staff from institutions of higher education, our research team intends to further identify ways to foster improved collaboration between these groups in our local context. We found that the young adults we worked with had difficulties understanding how to apply for financial aid, and how to interpret financial aid offers. The young adults often relied on their parents for assistance. As such, we are working on developing targeted web pages, videos, and information packets that rural students and their parents can use. Because rural students often relied on support and advice from high school teachers, we intend to make personalized connections with teachers in our area. Our rural student co-researches plan to make videos and handouts for rural parents who want to help their children through the college and financial aid application process. Furthermore, the young adults expressed concerns about how the coronavirus social distancing guidelines may affect their ability to develop social connections with their peers during virtual or hybrid lectures. Our university is currently exploring ways to foster students' engagement with their peers through technology, such as our campus social media app.

Limitations

The data found through this study is limited to the participating institution and the rural communities our institution aims to serve; therefore, this data is not generalizable, but serve as a starting ground for our institution to better understand how we can refine our outreach efforts to better serve the rural communities in our area. Because the study's participant numbers were small and found through snowball sampling, it may be beneficial to gather data from a larger population to produce representative findings. Also, it may be beneficial for our research team to hear from more stakeholder groups in rural communities, such as parents, high school educators and administrative staff, other community

members, and a larger number of young adults who do not plan on attending college. Though the data shared in our findings is not generalizable, it may contribute to educators and academic researchers' understanding of the barriers rural students may face in terms of college access, as well as provide an added perspective of what the post-high school graduation decision-making process may be like for many rural students.

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Authors' note

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Corresponding Author: Brook Batch: Brook.Batch@msj.edu.

Biographies

Brook Batch is a first-year educational studies doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati. She received a bachelor's degree in English from Thomas More University. She currently works as a content editor and research associate for Mount St. Joseph University. Her research interests include postsecondary literacy, writing communities, college access, and using technology to engage diverse populations.
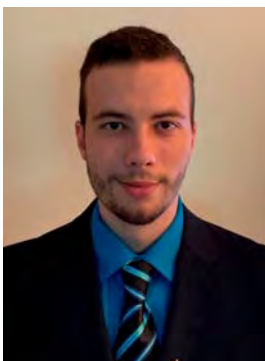
Noah Douglas is a first-year undergraduate student at Mount St Joseph University. He is currently working as a student content designer and student research assistant for Mount St. Joseph University's Center for IT Engagement. His research interests include the rural community, college access, and using technology to solve educational issues.

Mackenzie Roth is a first-year undergraduate student at Mount St. Joseph University. She received an associate's degree in science from Vincennes University. She works as student research assistant for the Center for IT Engagement. Her research interests include extracurricular participation, rural student college access, healthcare, pediatrics, sports medicine, and physical therapy.
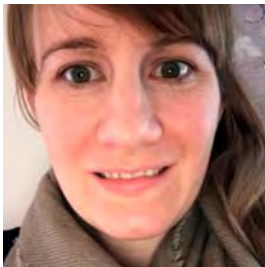
Rebecca Allen is an Assistant Professor at Mount St. Joseph University. She teaches Natural Language Processing and does research at the university's Center for IT Engagement — her research interests include action research, resource navigation, and access disparities.

Alex Nakonechnyi serves as Mount St. Joseph University's Associate Provost. He received his PhD in Educational Studies from the University of Cincinnati. His research interests revolve around engaging students in learning through technology.

Jackie Roberts is a first-year educational studies doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati. She earned a BS in Marketing and a Masters of Business Administration from Mount St. Joseph University. She currently works as an Instructional Technology and Data Visualization Manger for Mount St. University. Her research interests include mobile learning, blended synchronous learning, and designing innovative learning environments.

Aesthetics and participatory research: Enriching the quality of our epistemology

Susan Goff

Abstract

Aesthetics are familiar to action researchers who use arts-based methods. They are included in Heron's and Reason's Extended Epistemology which recognises aesthetic qualities within Experiential and Presentational forms of knowing. This essay proposes that the field of aesthetics offers a history of development and a particular understanding about human experience with which action researchers can enrich their practice beyond methodological considerations. "Aesthetic muteness", or a cultural inability to speak of aesthetics in domains outside the field of aesthetics, significantly reduces its potential application. Through an aesthetic lens, action researchers can pay attention to momentary nuances that otherwise might not be recognized, or be significantly undervalued, but which contribute to practice in insightful and fluidly dynamic ways. They may, like silence, have aesthetic qualities within themselves, or, may offer liminal spaces within which aesthetic sensibilities may be sensed and articulated which otherwise would be invisbilised in taken for granted practices devoid of such discourses. To connect aesthetics with action research in practice, I propose a principle of "tacitly knowing distinctions through which we apprehend meaning as form". I demonstrate this principle experientially, analytically and through narrative.

Key words: Aesthetics, action research, participatory practice, under-determinacy, epistemology

What is known about the topic?

Experiential and presentational knowing refer to aesthetic values in describing sensory and interpretive knowledge practices

What does this paper add?

Strengthens the focus on aesthetics with formal references to the field of aesthetics in inter-disciplinary relationship with the field of AR and AL

Who will benefit from its content?

Practitioners in aesthetics interested in bring participatory principles to their conceptualising; theorists of AR practices wishing to bring more focus to the power of aesthetic theory to participatory knowledge theory

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

Confirms and strengthens practices that use artistic as well as sensory references; increases egalitarianism of participatory engagement

Introduction

> As a researcher, I want to step into the labyrinth of lived experience, where moving straight ahead becomes an impossibility, where the hegemony of the gaze is rejected, where asking questions is a process of the flesh - it is movement, encountering otherness, both threatening and comedic (Saarnivaara, 2003, p. 588).

I love Saarnivaara's desire to live her research practice, to make herself of such practice: Humbly, I see myself in her experience. Between us we "hold" a felt sense of the nature of participation. In her framing her experience as "labyrinth" she sweeps me into her myth of journey as I too would want to live it. I am held taught and imminent in her extraordinary wilful determination not only to resist, but also to *reject* hegemony - a paradoxical dynamism in a mutual gaze. Her skin-prickling understanding of questioning shakes the confident objective mechanism out of inquiry and restores it to a more tentative gesture, where my uncertainties, readiness for vulnerability, and carelessness of cautionary tales also dwell.

Each of Saarnivaara's registrations I experience aesthetically before I take them into other ways of knowing: through her words, we are

encountering aesthetics in participatory research practice. Her practices involve sensing, perceiving and expressing transformations that otherwise may not be recognized. In league with her text, we meet in an anachronistic moment of mutual regard. She holds me within this primary experience as my patterns of being reorganize themselves to recognise hers. The transformation that comes into being with her, apprehends and appreciates qualities of truth and beauty which without her word, might go un-noticed within me. Her aesthetic choices both capture and release us to each other in polysemic, appreciative actualization of new ways of knowing.

Within Saarnivaara's gaze then, I ask: Why am I drawn to aesthetics in participatory research practices? I am a participatory practitioner who uses multiple forms of participatory research, evaluation, learning, designing and planning both formally and informally. One of my edges, one moment in which I rub against and with others, is deepening our understanding of what "participation" really means in practice. I understand that how I know participation (experientially, categorically, critically, constructively, poetically) is inalienable from what I know of it. I understand that both these aspects of knowing (the how and the what) and the various activities that they give rise to (such as writing, discourse, learning, giving and taking) exert particular qualities of power into the world (Richardson, 1997). When we appreciate participatory practices as management or science, for example, they exert managerial and scientific powers – and the meanings of power are reconstructed to enable those fields; similarly when I appreciate participation aesthetically, my practice exerts aesthetic powers – and similarly, the meaning of "power" is reconstructed to serve the field of aesthetics. In this paper I suggest that "aesthetics" are essential to good participatory practice because of the quality of power that they generate through an aesthetic appreciation and construction of participation. It is a quality of power that enables inclusion through appreciation of that which may not otherwise be noticed or valued; which critiques monotheisms of power embedded in institutions as taken for granted realities by noticing their patterns and manifestations

which otherwise might be invisible. Aesthetics tunes sensitivity and interpretation – to open us to intervention.

May I also contend that aesthetic appreciation is different to other appreciations of our practices in one radical sense. Aesthetic sensitivity is a precursor to any other form of recognition and meaning making: before I can denote the managerial, scientific, ethical, philosophical or any other emphasis that a participatory approach may privilege, I am making aesthetic considerations about that which I am encountering, which is encountering me. Whether I am using Arnstein's "ladder of participation" (1969), Torbert's "action science" (2001), Halliwell's intonation to "ask the people" (1969) or Martin's non-violent action (2001), my first encounter with these ideas in word and in action is aesthetic. I am sensing their presence, creating their form and meaning, patterning and connecting by means of them, discerning and hovering in an unfolding relationship with them in living situations. I am working this way when I read, listen, observe, introspect, craft, move and feel my way into any other framing of participatory practice – or any practice that is manifestly non-participatory.

The primacy of aesthetics is true regarding our physical and cognitive sensing of anything, but particularly potent in the sensing of "participation" as an experience of involvement in or with our subject of enquiry. This stirring sense of the existence of some recognisable form or quality with and in which we are ourselves inextricably involved is I suggest, the actual origin of participatory enquiry: no aspect of sensing participation is independent from being in and of it - as for example, Saarnivaara articulates in her reference to "process of the flesh" (2003, p. 588). It may often arise from what seems like a tiny and often overlooked moment but has the potential to transform our constructions and practices in remarkable ways. The field of aesthetics offers a depth of philosophy, mind, creativity, and embodied sensing that while requiring some initial effort to appreciate can also explain and enhance important aspects of action research. In consideration of these reflections, I find there are three reasons why I want to write about aesthetics in participatory research practices:

- The field of aesthetics offers traditions and contemporary wisdoms that throw new light on the nature of action research practices – a different lens

- Aesthetic sensitivity in our practice enlivens how we know participation and how we know the matters and identities that participatory approaches in general manifest – a different body

- In the hands of participatory practitioners, including those working in the field of aesthetics, aesthetics is also enlivened; there is a redolent affinity or 'resonance' between the two fields (of action research and aesthetics). In other words, a different arena.

Following Saarnivaara my desire as a participatory researcher is to be awake to those earliest stirrings of participatory involvement. I want to create opportunities with which to give those with whom I am in relationship the highest qualities of sensitivity, the most original creativity, the deepest imaginative reach, the most dynamic spirit of being that I can offer to our mutual endeavours. It is about attuning my human being to the richness of existence within a participatory endeavour so that our living "data" is energized and regenerative enough for the work it must do.

In this paper I begin with a narrative of aesthetics at work within my participatory research practice and the broader field. I refer to silence held within a workshop environment as an example of a medium that both holds aesthetic qualities and within which aesthetic sensibility may stir and enrich our inquiry practices. I am not proposing that silence is a definition of aesthetics, but a medium, like a piece of music or a painting. I demonstrate the connections by working Heron and Reason's (1997) proposition of an Extended Epistemology into Seel's (2005) proposition regarding Aesthetic Perception. In the process I bring to light a practice principle for such work.

Seel's text on "Aesthetics of Appearing" (2005) has been a companion reader for this inquiry. Seel traces eight "short stories" of his history of aesthetics, from Baumgarten (1750) to Adorno

(1970) to introduce his thesis. He arrives at a starting position that would decry definitions within which to articulate his study. He dwells within the indeterminacy of that which is coming into perception, and the irreducibility of the living experience of perceiving. "No consciousness of one's present is possible without aesthetic consciousness" (p. 16). As a facilitator of participatory inquiry this delicacy of imminence spoke to me of human egalitarianism and crafted mindfulness – aesthetics not as elitist, but a characteristic of humanness. If this is so, how can we not pay more attention to the field of aesthetics in our practices?

I use this hybrid principle of indeterminacy and irreducibility in the context of a proposition which I call "enriched epistemology of aesthetics in our action research practices" to tell the story of the relationship between aesthetics and action research as I have experienced it. I do this by means of a story about a forum which discussed the question of aesthetics in our research practices. True to Seel's sensibility however, I write in such a manner as to enable the reader to experience moments of indeterminacy not always explaining my sequences as an invitation to you, the reader, to be the final author of this piece. I suggest that this style of writing makes the text a living aesthetic, related to the action of action research. I conclude with a summary to reassert the significance of such an approach at this current time in human development.

A story

> Thank you for the call today. Just wanted to comment on the discussion a little further...with a further apology for late coming ... Do you feel that the participants understood the value of the silences? How was this introduced to them? I had to come to grips with this really early … as I am so often with people who are really eager to participate. I have a tendency to be oversensitive to an extended silence and have to revisit my perception of the length of time that a period of silence remains productive and at what point it leads to loss. Cheers. Alice (not her real name).

I had co-facilitated a two-hour session with thirty managers from a local government council to consider the question of responsibility

for sustainability within the organisation's systems. Following the event, one of the participants sent me the email above and we had a brief exchange about the nature of "silence". I have selected this comment because it exemplifies aesthetics at work in participatory practices. I want to consider the aesthetic field in terms other than art-based practices, which while a rich and powerful participatory tradition are a secondary quality of aesthetic practice because they have already been diverted behind a disciplinary boundary in the positivist sense.

Alice was a community developer, and in this event, her senses were attuned to the experience of silence and its relationship to interpersonal connectivity. I experience silence in dialogue sessions particularly before the first person talks. It can be a long and tortured moment. Silence in groups can bring forward our anxieties with each other and ourselves. Often the reaction is to cover them up with nervous laughter, fidgeting or premature statements; sometimes they are allowed to breath the air of public disquiet - or in other situations, peace. When I read Alice's reflection I can sense from my own experiences her thoughts in the silences, searching out other peoples' discomforts and weighing them up with her own. Silence is a resource for the practitioner to look beyond the surfaces and See, Hear, Feel and Touch the inarticulate that grounds our ways of learning, beliefs, and attitudes.

Participatory practitioners conventionally work with what is, and with what is not. Even with preordained goals or procedures, how can we work with what can be without dwelling in this indeterminate dimension? The reader may need to slow down for this next thought:

> Only because of what is not there, it is possible that there is what is there; and only because what is there it is possible that there is not what is not there (Lao Tsu cited in Max-Neef, 2005, p. 16).

 We recognise and value what is there, regarding participants' experiences, ways of learning and knowing, energy and history, qualities of relationships and powerful questions. We also

recognise what is not there in reference to a felt sense of what could be, what was but is no longer, what may be disappearing and wishes to be restored, even what has been forgotten, and what has been forgotten that it was forgotten. As Max-Neef reminds us, these differences of being and not being are intertwined qualities of an emerging entity, which is incomplete without the evolution of human consciousness. Participatory practices include those that search out, open up to and stay awake to things coming into being and things being left behind. So often it feels like pinching something out of the air, making substantial that which otherwise might not be detected explicitly. As I think Seel would agree, Alice's irreducible self-made silence made substantial by noticing it and exploring its possibilities. This is aesthetic sensibility, stirring awareness at a primal level of engagement, having the potential to shift qualities of Alice's practice and the entities that come into being through it.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics are on the butcher's paper, and in our poise, in the pacing of question and response, the tone of our laughter, the use of a Tibetan bell to call us back from our breaks, the quality of light in the room, in the choice to sit or stand, in what we wear. A colleague of mine once pointed out that being a vegan he only wore plastic or textile shoes: a moral stance expressed and read through aesthetic choices, the root of his practice stance. As practitioners open to our aesthetic qualities of action research practice, we enjoy a heritage:

> I introduce a model of holistic knowing which holds that propositional knowing… is interdependent with three other kinds of knowing: practical knowing, or knowing how to exercise a skill; presentational knowing, an intuitive grasp of the significance of patterns as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms; and experiential knowing, imaging and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing (Heron, 1996, p. 52).

This paper follows Heron's (1996) and Reason's (1998) pioneering calls to attend to aesthetics in participatory research practice, co-joining with other contributors such as Sandelands (1998), Eiserman (2000), Strati (2005), Taylor (2002) and Saarnivaara (2003) to invite practitioners to consider the place of aesthetics in research practices in general.

The separation of aesthetics from knowledge (formal and informal ways of knowing) which such calls are recognising, is historically traced in western development to Kant (e.g. Gadamer, 1975, p. 41) who determined that aesthetic consciousness was not rational and therefore, in the tradition of the Enlightenment, not knowledge. This assertion remained unchallenged in western thought until, through the special devotion of artists and philosophers, the field of aesthetics has matured into its current postmodern discourses. It continues to undergo this maturation, largely beyond our daily gaze and without us, reflecting the familiar persistence of fragmenting epistemology throughout western social systems (Bohm and Edwards, 1991).

Such "aesthetic muteness", or the suppression of "discourse about the aesthetic aspect of the day-to-day experience" (Taylor, 2002, p. 827) impoverishes us as sensate beings. In organizations at least, this discourse is lost in the decisions made between the essential and superfluous, the serious and facetious, the scientific and the artistic (Strati and de Montoux, 2002, p. 757). Participatory research can assume the same cultural blind when any of the domains that powerfully influence its framing (such as management, community development, or journalism) share aesthetic muteness in their constructions. Added to our cultural silence about aesthetics is the characteristic of aesthetic knowing itself, which is necessarily tacit in its experiential mode, making articulation of its presence in other domains and contexts even more difficult (Taylor, 2002, p. 837). Following Polanyi (1958) the authors have shown, tacit knowing to be present in all forms of knowing. It is not in opposition to it but the foundation from which all acts of knowing, even in their different forms, arise. It follows then, that aesthetic knowing, in its tacit form at least, may also be present in the other side of explicit knowledge in any context or domain.

This aesthetic disability that we have in our midst is damaging. Many, from Nietzsche on, claim that aesthetic sensibility is present in *all* aspects of human experience (e.g. Gadamer, 1975, p. 86). Our loss of cultural practices around aesthetic sensibilities risks our being increasingly deaf, blind and numb, within and without our corporeal frames, to all aspects of our living. As we retreat into a sensory vacuum (accentuated by our corporate physical environments and remote engagement) we risk giving default permission for violation of sensibility on all fronts, all life forms – increasingly deaf to it, and worse, less able to hear/see/feel and think in other ways:

> …aesthetics can provide the basis for a powerful critique of human actions and their products that demean human values and devastate large parts of the human habitat (Berleant and Hepburn, 2003).

What is left of the everyday, as blurred, and numb as it may feel sometimes, is the now remnant stuff of experiential knowing and social transformation ("morphogenesis", Polanyi, 1958). It is here, in these remnants, that some say we are turning around in our understanding that aesthetics are essential for us to be well-balanced people and communities, and indeed will revive with our transformative development:

> If we believe Dobson's [1999] argument that the fundamental societal shift to aesthetic-based decision making and action has already occurred, then aesthetic muteness will disappear as our language catches up with reality (Taylor, 2002, p. 837).

Taylor goes on to discuss that if we know ourselves primarily through feelings and senses, then aesthetics should be a basis for sociology at least. While we have the option to move into this area of knowledge as a limited methodology or object of curiosity, we could embrace aesthetics as a "paradigm shift" (Taylor, ibid) - an ontological transformation. It is within this dimension, which in practice comes through the minute and overlooked moments of for example, silence, confusion and other forms of distinction such as conversation analysis (Puolakka, 2017) that action research and aesthetics become entwined.

Aesthetics in our action research practices

As I look around our communities of action research practices I see us working at our edges, addressing our aesthetic limitations within ourselves, within participatory inquiry environments and in the co-generation of work at the level of third person (Torbert, 2001). Not being aestheticists we might be a little "ignorant of the proper concerns" of aesthetics (Gaskell, 2008), but perhaps we are prepared to mutually display our ignorance to ferment the delightful discourses of coming to know together.

For example and following Torbert's structure of first, second and third person inquiry: aesthetics in first person research practice is at work when a practitioner creates multi-vocality in their inquiry practices (Weil, 1996), "breaks genre", or shifts from objectifying to poetic scholarly language (Richardson, 1997); it is alive in second person inquiry when we build capacities for participation by introducing aesthetic skills such as learning to listen (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2001), learning to see, (Senge et al, 2005) and using artistic media like theatre (Mienczakowski and Morgan, 2001) as modes for interpersonal interactions; and it springs into third person dimensions when a readership is shifted to stand in the shoes of unemployed youth as they tell their stories - "imagine you are there. Imagine this *you* is really you" (Weil, Wildemeersch & Jansen, 2005, p. 28), and when some create entire new forms of engagement in the world - like "heuristic research" (Moustakas, 1990), dialogue (Bohm, 1996), and a "participatory inquiry paradigm" (Heron and Reason, 1997).

In the everyday of participatory engagements, it is a familiar experience when returning workshop notes to participants, even when they have been publicly notated on the day, for people to say, "did we really say all that?" They do not doubt it, but they are delighted that so much was done with so little, that so much wisdom exists that is frequently dismissed. "How do you do that?" they ask the practitioner. Again, it is aesthetics at work in our corporeal and cognitive senses. We see themes emerging from sentences, sub-themes gathering themselves into their brackets,

connections and contradictions dotting their ways between islands of interests, sometimes even with arrows and labels to indicate their character. As we look into the self-conscious sketching of a cartoon on a group devised map, we notice the penned expression and ask what it might mean rather than see it as un-artistic. We might feel the slight warble in a participant's articulations and shift our practice orientation to enable depth rather than breadth at a particular moment. Something in the way a woman presents herself makes us see her as a practitioner in the making, even though she does not know that such a vocation exists. We see questions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations gathering themselves up through the multiple strands of meaning and word, experience, action, inaction, and value. We see the potential for this insight within those with whom we work. We conjure within and between us the relationships for these human capabilities to become evident to everyone else. We must guard against the automation of such practice which would blind us to these human imminences, entrap and asphyxiate the energies of emergence.

Beyond the meta edges of participatory research practices, we are also seeing aesthetics being drawn into inquiry practices in discipline-specific fields such as therapy (Groth, 2001), sport (Stranger, 1999) and information technology such as hypertext (Strati, 2005). While these external assaults are knocking at its doors, aesthetics as a specialized field of practice is engaged in its own internal turn. It is coming out of its philosophical and artistic boundaries to encounter multi-disciplinarity (Gaskell, 2008), epistemological emancipation (Seel, 2005) and a call within its own ranks to move away from specialization:

> I hope to persuade a predominately philosophical readership, deeply invested in its chosen discipline, that although, first, as I have argued, aesthetics is always at the very least implicitly inter-disciplinary, and, second, that in spite of being so it can be pursued from within philosophy, nonetheless, it would be greatly to the advantage of everyone interested in aesthetics that it should be pursued on a broad intellectual front (Gaskell, 2008).

This turn opens discourse between aesthetics and participatory research practice, in a most significant way given participatory research practice's capacities in working from the unknown and generating multi- and trans-disciplinary ways of knowing. We are well matched in our shared journey beyond fragmented thinking and practice: "overcoming aesthetic muteness is necessary to be whole" (Taylor, 2002, p. 838). Aesthetics and participation overcome fragmentation within our own respective fields, in our relationship to each other (the fields of aesthetics and participatory research) and in what can be envisioned from a coherent stance built on aesthetic and participatory research practices as one. Arguably it is fundamental to any multi and inter-disciplinary engagement.

Hermeneutics

> Our most deeply engrained convictions are determined by the idiom in which we interpret our experience and in terms of which we erect our articulate systems (Polanyi, 1958, p. 287).

While commentators have repeatedly indicated a close relationship between aesthetics and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1958; Strati, 2005; Berleant and Hepburn, 2003), like Taylor (2002, p. 837) following Polanyi (1958), it seems to me that the two fields converge at certain points to become *integral* to one another - made of the same stuff. I am proposing that these points of convergence are an origin of participation. I pursue this proposition through an analysis of two works: Heron's notion of participative reality and Seel's notion of aesthetic perception.

At one point in "Co-operative Inquiry", Heron (1996, p. 163) describes participative reality as:

> …neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective, neither wholly dependent on my mind nor wholly independent of my mind. It is always subjective-objective, inseparable from the creative, participative, engaged activity of my mind but never reducible to it, always transcending it.

In comparison, Seel outlines six aspects of aesthetic perception (See, Seel, 2005, pp. 88-89). All are instructive, but for the purposes of this discussion, his sixth is particularly powerful:

> An irreducible sensuous perception, aesthetic perception is richly equipped not just with concepts that it retains in its play, it is also open to reflective movements with which it ascertains the strategy and construction of the objects of appearing. In doing so, it employs and produces … knowledge that serves, in the process of perception, to elucidate complex processes in the object of this perception.

Seel is stating that aesthetic perception is more than simply physical senses at work in an instinctive or even conscious manner (for example, sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, and proprioception (Bohm, 1992)). Aesthetic sensing includes within it an inventive quality that actively constructs both the means of perceiving along with what is being perceived and is aware that it is doing so. It is co-evolution of knowing in the first person. In relationship to Heron's observation of participatory reality, aesthetic perception as described by Seel embodies the interplay of subjective-objective ontologies that through Heron's participatory research frame, constructs a living reality and the living theories (the strategies that construct the objectives of appearing) that are the architectures of such reality. As action researchers and co-researchers, is this not what we "see" when we discern values manifesting as actions, meanings bubbling up through otherwise incoherent data, shifts in otherwise stuck systems? Is this not foundational to the literacy of action in our research?

Let me read Heron's understandings of participation through Seel's understanding of aesthetics in the following table to illustrate the points of convergence. I see these convergences as sensory conceptual movement, forming fluent connectivity in otherwise tacitly known distinctions (such as Alice's silence, Seel's invisibility of the pre-emergent state of a potential object, the brainstormed blobs of data on butcher papers without connection and meaning). In the sensing of discontinuity, we create the flow of meaning as form, which I suggest, is the basis of participation, interpretation and meaning making, and related practices. In the

table that follows I am enacting participatory aesthetic practices: recognising tacit discontinuity between the two statements and generating form as meaning from the discontinuity.

While the two statements are disassociated from each other by their ontological boundaries (research practice on the one hand and aesthetics on the other) an aesthetic sensing in research practice sees Seel and Heron identifying the same principles through complementary frames: that perception and experience are the origins of participation where participation is understood as the manifestation of meaning as reality formation. By focusing on the experiential construction of this experience, perceived as tacit knowing, distinction, apprehension and meaning as form, the insights from aesthetics and participatory practices become a co-evolutionary field, which otherwise would remain fractionated.

Bohm (1998, p. 16) describes this experience so much more eloquently:

> …in a creative act of perception one first becomes aware (generally non verbally) of a new set of relevant differences, and one begins to feel out or otherwise to note a new set of similarities which do not come merely from past knowledge, either in the same field or in a different field. This knowledge leads to a new order, which then gives rise to a hierarchy of new orders that constitutes a set of new kinds of structure. The whole process tends to form harmonious and unified totalities, felt to be beautiful, as well as capable of moving those who understand them in a profoundly stirring way.

If it is acceptable that aesthetic perception and tacit knowing converge with one another at particular moments of knowing (tacit distinction making, apprehension and interpretation) and given tacit knowing's status of inalienability from any form of knowing (Tsoukas, 2005), it follows that aesthetics too shares this inalienable status. Such a proposition is consistent with Seel's assertion that aesthetic sensibility is inalienable from be conscious to the present moment. It makes sense that participatory practitioners are intuitively turning to aesthetic sensibilities to broaden our epistemological range beyond instrumentalism:

Aesthetics and tacit knowing converge as a source of participation:	Tacit knowing (focal and subsidiary knowing)	Distinctions (distinguishing a transition zone in an otherwise continuous process in the tacit domain)	Apprehension (an idea formed through observation or experience)	Interpretation (ascribing meaning)
Heron – participative reality is:	"Neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective"	"Neither wholly dependent on my mind nor wholly independent of it"	"It is always subjective-objective"	"Inseparable from the creative, participative, engaged activity of my mind but never reducible to it, always transcending it"
Seel's aesthetic perception at work:	"Concepts within the play of aesthetic perception"	"The construction of the object of appearing"	"Reflective moments in which aesthetic perception ascertains the strategy"	"Produces knowledge that serves in the process of perception to elucidate complex processes in the object of this perception"
In summary:	Tacitly known	Discontinuities	Through which we Apprehend	Meaning as Form

Table 1: Heron's and Seel's propositions through an aesthetic lens

> Wherever the ability to perceive or imagine something in its appearing is realized, aesthetic consciousness emerges (Seel, 2005, p. 104).

This is what it feels like when knowing forms within me, when I hear and see the experiences of others in interactive inquiry environments. Imagine such sensitivities at work in the realms and scales of transformational change liberating us from the strictures of technical analyses and solutions which will inevitably fail the transformational brief. For example (and please note that the bracketed inserts are my additions to illustrate the connections in this quotation to what we are discussing here):

> I feel/think that I am developing a new fluency in a heart/mind language [tacit knowing] where the heart/mind dichotomy is more malleable and permeable [a distinction]. Degrees of comfort become legitimate in themselves as indicators of whether something is 'right' or 'correct' [apprehending a strategy]. Another way of putting this might be that I have moved to a more substantial capacity to trust my 'gut feelings', which is a form of practical knowing or mastery [meaning as form] (Participant evaluation, Goff, 2006, PhD candidature data).

When I receive something like this evaluative insight to our work I am filled with effervescence, luminosity and gymnastic energy curled up into the latent form that the person's insight has also seen. It is the same sense of movement into systemic, unfolding realization that I experience when reading Saarnivaara's words. These qualities of light, meaning and form are aesthetic qualities that constitute our perceptual "movement" together. The domain of art engages them for individual experience and insight, which in some instances may constitute an ontological shift such as the expressionist or surrealist movements in the early twentieth century. Such movements are profound but tend to remain within the arts domain. The domain of action research engages these same qualities of light, meaning and form as quanta of social transformation, manifesting different forms of movement towards a participatory worldview for broad socio-ecological health and wellbeing.

The turn to practice

Gasché's analysis (2002) of the development of aesthetics through the western enlightenment opens up distinctions that I recognize in my research practice, which I would not have named "aesthetic" until recently. He identifies the kinetics of "cognizability" (something becoming knowable), the unity of concept and experience, the systemic of self-reflected limit (seeing oneself and one's limits in what one senses aesthetically), and by implication that transformative potential of what lies beyond. Because these observations are apprehensions of form in the immaterial these are aesthetic understandings as much as participatory ones - and evident in participant experience as the quoted reflections above illustrate.

How does naming this kind of work as "aesthetic" unsettle and move my practice? I want to understand if, like participation itself, our work in aesthetics is re-naturing humanity, restoring it as an "every person" capacity to live life with greater appreciation and mindful responsibility. Or is aesthetic sensitivity not so egalitarian in nature?

> What applies to all perception only in principle applies to aesthetic perception at all times. That is what constitutes its special place (Seel, 2005, p. 89).

In other words, I read Seel as saying, that while all human perception can be understood theoretically as having aesthetic qualities, aesthetic perception consciously applies these principles all the time. If perception does not embody these principles, it is not aesthetic. Does this make aesthetic perception something that has to be learned, formally, through the privilege of education or can it be conjured, remembered, in the more subtle and holistic experiences of active participation in the many contexts that "participation" is discerned (civic, community, learning and activism, for example [1])? The question relates to our practices at

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[1] These conceptions of 'participation' are referenced to my thesis: *The value of participatory practice to sustainability*, Goff, 2006.

junctions that come about depending on how we understand aesthetic muteness at any one moment or situation: is it a consequence of sociological suppression, physiology and genetics, or epistemology? Our research practices would be different in each case.

Aesthetics enters participatory research practice when practices at first, second and third person levels embody the "extended epistemology" of *aesthetics*. If aesthetic muteness is a result of epistemic oppression and if aesthetics can through participatory practices, be restored to their "natural" place in tacit knowing, we can build on Heron's proposition of an "extended epistemology" and see aesthetics articulated as pattern and art in the second level of the participatory epistemology, or "presentational" knowing (Heron, 1996; Reason, 1998). The field of aesthetics sees itself in equivalent ways.

For example, there are distinctions between aesthetic Sensibility ("aesthesia": Grace, 1996), aesthetic Experience, aesthetic Representation, Judgment and Consciousness ("sensuousness of thought and the possibility of an embodied sense of knowing" - Grace, 1996, p. 3), which we can see as being strongly related to Heron and Reason's extended epistemology. If we consider the development from experience, to representation, judgement and consciousness, these distinctions resonate powerfully with Heron and Reason's construction of an extended epistemology which also travels from experiential knowing, to presentational (representation), propositional knowing (judgement) and practical knowing (aesthetic consciousness). We can recognize aesthesia, anesthesia and aesthetic experiences as "experiential knowing"; we can see representation as art or aesthetic intellect enter the epistemology at the level of "presentational knowing", and the movement from sensibility to representation (Taylor, 2002, p. 827) as "participation". Aesthetic judgment within research, deploying philosophy and theories of aesthetics can be seen as "propositional knowing", while aesthetic consciousness is akin to participatory knowing in the "practical domain" of the extended epistemology. Without naming it "participatory" Seel (2005, p. 98) describes the whole extended epistemology at work through the eyes of

aesthetics. Again, he comments on the interplay between the indeterminant and the irreducible:

> The present within which we move as acting beings is always equipped with an abundance of unexhausted epistemic possibilities and unrealized action opportunities. In this dovetailing of reality and possibility – in the fact that every present action consists of existent and nonexistent, seized and missed possibilities of knowledge and action – here is a common root of two contrary forces of aesthetic perception: to lose oneself in the real or to go beyond everything that is (so far) real.

Is not this potential movement also our experience of the extended epistemology?

> The crossing of a logical gap to another shore, where we shall never again see things as we did before (Polanyi, 1958, p. 189).

Peering into the flourishing of aesthetics in inquiry I am seeking an understanding of what is happening within the aesthetic realm of participation. Like many others, I embrace both foundational and contemporary contributors as well as my own work to guide my understanding. I go on to work an "extended epistemology of aesthetics" in action research practice by bringing to this discussion reflections on a forum event.

An enriched epistemology of aesthetics in action research practice

Aesthetic experiences

> I place the transparency on the overhead projector.
>
> The image is an introduction to my question about aesthetics in our research practice. I cast my eyes down, fold my hands and step back. The year is 2004 and I am in an English university.
>
> I do not want to "observe" us as we work through what is on the screen. I am thinking: it is this first moment of apprehension that our tacit aesthetic is most alive, innocent

and sacred. I don't have the words to explain myself. I don't want to shape others' experience any further than I already have by sharing this image with my fellow inquirers. Discontinuity, apprehension, tacit knowing and interpretation are alive as the image forms within everyone's mind. There is a long silence. ["*It seemed to me that the longest imaginable distance separated irregular German verb forms from this kitchen table*" *(Murakami, 1987, p. 179)]*

Our mute state is not the silence of suppression, even in the presence of such an image, but of awe.

On the wall is a projection of a turtle that was picked up in Florida. It had swum into a plastic drink bottle ring when it was young and been unable to escape its grip even though it could still swim, feed and continue to live. It had grown its shell into an adult sized turtle on either side of the ring, but the persistent device had trapped a section of the original baby-sized body between anterior and posterior ends of the animal's shell. It looks more like a set of elk antlers than a turtle.

The image landed on my kitchen table on World Environment Day. Our local Sydney paper ran a special edition (Thomson, 2004). It illustrated an article about the effect of human waste on the non-human environment, one of several such stories about the deteriorating state of the environment. It is risky: it defies the idea of aesthetics as beauty, art or nature in a familiar sense, while also conjuring engagement across the longest imaginable distances born of patterned meaning in this transgressed, disappearing and emergent world. The image is innately transgressive.

My eyes are still downcast. The silence burns. I can feel the participants' questions and discomfort pricking me. As they gaze into the image on the wall people begin to speak (SOLAR, Forum 2004):

"We eat turtle soup. It's just a turtle, why all the fuss?"; "As well as the pain and horror there is actually some beauty … In the midst of almost any horrific situation you will find beauty"; "I am actually physically pained"; "It is reality but a very distorted reality"; "A terrible beauty".

> My heart is beating fast. I am surprised at the repeated referencing to beauty as an un-discussed interpretation of aesthetics. Together we are approaching ourselves anew in this sudden context that is articulating through the image: collaborative participation in the contemplation, the reaching for meaning, the rejection, the compassion. Under-determinacy[2] is here, and we are unformed in relationship to the image and its meanings. It is in the falling out of our comfort zones that aesthetics come into being.

Aesthetic presentations

> Uncharted territories are always beckoning. Beauty is at home in this realm of the invisible, the unexpected and the unknown (O'Donohue, 2004, p. 61).

On what grounds do I propose that it is aesthetics at these liminal edges of knowing, and not something else that is the source of participation, say, ethics, or ontology? Why is it important to name a source, to name it so and now, and not continue to practice without clarity in this regard?

Aesthetics are powerful. Twinned with tacit knowing they cohere and keep us suspended between focal and subsidiary knowing (Seel, 2005, pp. 141-145). They have the capacity to cohere the objective and subjective (Grondin, 1998, p. 8). As a form of apprehension, aesthetics transform *themselve*s in the act of aesthetic appreciation (Gadamer, 1975, p. 99).

What are the energetic qualities that are forming between the image of the turtle and its existences: as a play of light on pigmented colour, participant reflexivity, a paradigmatic shift, and/or an installation? I look up, everyone is talking; one person is saying (SOLAR, Forum 2004):

> "Those fleeting moments in working with real diversity, real issues of power, and all the pain and everything else around the I's and the we's in the room... in those moments

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2   Under-determinacy: "not an internal order of nature or being but the infinite field of possibilities that is left open by such order" (Seel, 2005, p. 11)

> when something is held, that allows us the courage to keep going– to stay there – there is an aesthetic in that for me."

By bringing aesthetic and participatory research capabilities together, we remain bound to our shared existential messiness while also facing the music of inner and outer senses. We can hold under-determinacy together, letting the patterning and emergence of form and meaning take place, together. We can together, as an act of individual and collective becoming, develop aesthetic participatory theory and practices throughout the complexities of power, suffering, illumination, and paradox piecing elements of a new form together as meaning forms within us. We can together embody these things, with more attention to sensory perception, to the energy of forming patterns and the flow of meaning that takes place as they come into contact with each other, with the flow of relationships between people, ideas, inner and outer worlds that comes with this experience, so that participatory inquiry is regenerative of life, a sacred science expressing the beauty and joy, pain and potential of active existence (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p. 11).

So potent is the generative quality of aesthetics that when present in artistic works it is given the character of "culturally emergent persons" by some (Grigoriev, 2005) interacting with space and people with particular and unique character. This quality is resonant of Polanyi's observation about heuristic fields gradually rising "to the rank of full personhood" (1958, p. 404), and Bohm's belief that thought has a life of its own (Bohm, 1994, pp. 10-11) which through the window of aesthetics, becomes self-aware.

The creative act simultaneously alters some of our reflexes and produces an expression, a presentation of sensing, sense making in embodied form, in words or some other means, which enable thought to take the expression up and move in a different way from there on (Bohm, Ibid, p. 150).

The separation of aesthetics from participation is like separating soul from spirit. Together they enable thought to move in less assured and more groping ways, less linear and more multi-dimensional, less dependent, predicted "leveraged" - and more

internally regenerative. The turtle in its aquarium, our sensing of its lit form on the wall, the story in its shell – already we are moving in a different way in the forum. Someone is saying (SOLAR, Forum 2004):

> "My sense is that the journey and the conversation we are having is trying to find the spaces where there is a level of connectedness that moves things and shifts things in ways that we can feel but that [also] have meaning in what we do. And that is quite difficult - to not be able to describe but have feeling and meaning in what we do."

Aesthetic propositions

Seel notes that at one time or another aesthetics was seen as "a better epistemology" (Seel, 2005, p. 1) and a "better ethics" until it became "simply a better way to philosophize" (p. 2). My interest in the introductory section to his text is in how his analysis shows aesthetics as a mode of action that *generates* epistemology, ethics and currently, philosophy. Here we see the theoretical aspects of aesthetic thinking offering value to the theoretical aspects of action research practices.

In the hands of participatory research practitioners, that which aesthetics generates (ethics, epistemology, philosophy) bends back recursively to build our experiential understanding of participation and aesthetics. It always seems that, however they are construed, aesthetics is emergent action cogenerating cultural movement and individual perceptive capability. The extent to which they are one with ethics and epistemology seems to be a matter of insight and history.

For example, Seel's history of aesthetics shows how the originator of the idea of aesthetics, Baumgarten (c1750), sees them as being a "special faculty of perception" with the power to make objects "present in their intuitive density" (Seel: 2005, p. 2). At the outset, aesthetics are understood as having a generative action of revealing that which we see in a particular way to constitute a form of knowing (epistemology).

Seel reports Kant as believing that "all the powers of knowledge are involved in aesthetic perception" (Seel, 2005, p. 3) but that the value of aesthetics is to linger in the experience of perceiving something as it is appearing - separate to knowing it. Kant saw this kind of experience as "unrepresentable repleteness" separating it from "scientific knowledge" in the tradition of the Enlightenment, but which contemporary understanding of knowledges might see as tacit knowing (Strati and Montoux, 2002, p. 761). Seel also reports Kant as being of the view that such aesthetic perception can be followed by anyone who possesses the appropriate cognitive faculties (a matter of physiology rather than suppression or epistemology, in reference to my earlier comments) and who "is willing" to participate in aesthetic perception (as defined by Kant). Here we see a first indication of aesthetics being a valuing of sensibility twinned with the will to act (participate). There is a separation between aesthetic sensibility (experiencing the world through the senses) and aesthetic experience sustained through will.

It is Hegel, according to Seel, who moves the argument forward to account for meaning as inalienable from aesthetic sensitivity and experience. By focusing the discussion on art as the aesthetic object, the matter of meaning (understood in Seel's text as "content") is what appears through sustained aesthetic experience of the artistic form (Seel, 2005, p. 5). Hegel's propositions are understood to enable us to have "an intuitive self-encounter that points way beyond [a person's] personal situation" (Seel, 2005, p. 6). Now, we are seeing aesthetics with the power to not only make one sensitive to something existing (referenced to Baumgarten), and sensitive to the quality of presence of something (referenced to Kant), be that in or beyond the world, but to the *appearing* of something that is not present without aesthetic agency, and moreover to the appearing of ourselves that would not exist without the same aesthetic agency. We are seeing the emergence of a hermeneutic between the one experiencing aesthetically and the power of aesthetics itself as a dynamic field: thought-feeling as participation.

Seel goes on to look at Schopenhauer whom he describes as working against the integrative directions of previous aestheticists to propose that aesthetics resist the oppressive demand of the real world to know it conceptually or in any other sense-making way. Aesthetics "overcome the empirical world" as a way of empowering us with an epistemological and ethical way of being that liberates us from "striving for worldly goods". Seel sees Schopenhauer interpreting aesthetic perception "as the avenue to optimum knowledge and action, as the acquisition of the correct view of things" (Seel, 2005, p. 7): transcendence.

Turning to Nietzsche, Seel traces the movement of aesthetics beyond asserting a morally correct view of things, which transcends the difficulties of oppressive reality, to move into the unknown: "the indeterminacy and ultimate uncontrollability of the real" (Seel, 2005, p. 9). Aesthetics are the dimension of form drawn from meaning to turn meaning back into "asemantic appearing". I read this as tacit knowing and recognise it as the moments of dynamic illumination that we sometimes experience in collaborative inquiry groups (otherwise known as the "ah-ha moment").

Still following the legacy of Kant, focusing on the artist as the aesthetic practitioner, Seel describes Valèry, as understanding aesthetic practice as rejecting transcendence and building on indeterminacy to be about going "beyond the creations of nature – not, however, in order to abandon the human world in favour of a realm of ideas, but to create a new, a second, world of intuitive forms". Valèry encounters the "under-determinacy of the real… the revelation of a special human freedom…the infinite field of possibilities …to see chaos in the order of things" (Seel, 2005, p. 11).

Already the overlaps with participatory practice are appearing: the complexities of polyvocality, the resistance of the authority of a singular view, the depth of value richness, the radicalism of a participatory worldview.

Heidegger's account of aesthetics brought historical process into its realm: an emergence and disappearance of "cultural horizons of

meaning" (Seel, 2005, p. 12). He describes aesthetic activity as taking place within the body of the artwork itself. He traces shifts in Western thought through such works. Now the manifestation of aesthetics is the very means by which human epochs travel.

Lastly, in this account, we meet Adorno who in Seel's words holds that works of art enable us to understand that "we do not really encounter the reality of our lives if we encounter it merely in a spirit of mastery" (p. 15). Enter the aesthetics of *becoming* through the "difference between determinable appearance and indeterminable appearing" – participation as being present to and in immanence.

As stated at the outset of this essay, Seel concludes the overview with "*no consciousness of one's present is possible without aesthetic consciousness*" (p. 16). Moreover, he claims, aesthetics reveal dimensions of reality that "evade epistemic fixation" but which are still central to our immediate experience of life. He claims that even more profoundly than aesthetic perception being the means of sensing what is and what is not, it creates a moment within which the ontological assumptions of existence are unformed:

> Appearing is a process of appearances that is not able to come to light as long as an object is under the purview of an epistemic or purposeful treatment (p. 47).

As stated in my introduction, it is at this scale of epistemic and ontological transformation that I see aesthetic theory and practice becoming one with action research theory and practice; it is at this depth of engagement that one without the other is like soul without spirit. While the tradition has been to make aesthetics the business of philosophers and artists, following Seel, it is possible that they are every person's faculty given the right conditions, which action research practices can bring about. Action research is perhaps the only practice that can radically question its ontological and epistemological traditions in service to the present. Aesthetic sensibility and practice create a way of being that enables this questioning to come about. Perhaps this is also true of the field of aesthetics in its encountering participatory action research.

Two hundred and fifty years of post-Enlightenment specialization has afforded the field its "autonomy" (Grondin, 1998) to grow powerful understandings of form, knowing and meaning. As participatory practitioners we are obliged to both honour the much-undervalued work of philosophers and artists who have brought so great a richness to the world, while also emancipating aesthetics into other ways of knowing particularly those that bring about social and environmental justice and equity. We need to do this now, at this crucial time in our history, because aesthetics are the agency, a form of power, that reveals more of us to ourselves in more areas of our experience and in ways that are freer of the determinacy of dominating epistemologies. We can do this because participatory research practice is generating a way of being and knowing in the world that is wanting and needing aesthetics to be a part of us:

> Something overcomes us, strikes us, makes us rethink, rediscover our experience, yet we cannot perfectly say what it is (Grondin, 1998, p. 7).

Aesthetics in our action research practices

The participants are saying (SOLAR, Forum 2004):

> "What colour?" "No – it's not… I am having a hard time of this concept you want us to explore – it's the turtle – I don't want to look at it – you put it up on the wall, I would prefer you didn't – to me it's not beauty – I don't know what we are looking at – I don't now [know], I am having a hard time, a hard time…"

Skolomowski (1994, p. 476) proposes that "the power of creation is the power of articulation" and that this power is common to both nature and the human universe. By developing new sensitivities, we can articulate with greater agency and make our universe richer, not poorer. As we have already seen aesthetics has the power to create new sensitivities to reveal (articulate) the world and ourselves to each other in under-determined and intrinsically participatory ways. Aesthetics articulate the universe and humanity as co-evolution into a new "logos", a new structure of meaning, as Skolomowski sees it. No matter what the new logoi

will be, aesthetics will be involved even when they are repressed. If we don't name it, we will sustain aesthetic muteness and the dangers that such muteness risks for new logos.

As participatory practitioners we know that the quality of new patterns of understanding self and world hold patterns of suppression as much as those of love. Creating new articulations of the world by some other means of knowing than dominating (exploiting) epistemologies is the primary value of our work. A means of doing this is by becoming aware of aesthetics: aesthetic sensibility exists in the under-determinacy of "reality" which is "a space" where hegemony can lose its voice. Consequently, an aesthetic space in action research practice possesses the agency of generating knowing with different qualities of "power". As participatory researcher practitioners we need to be in this space aesthetically to fully apprehend its potential regarding our commitment to emancipatory principles.

Recognizing aesthetics helps us better understand participatory research as sacred science in the emerging logoi. Aesthetic participatory research practices are coming into being as aesthetics reconsiders itself beyond its specialized philosophical and arts-anchored borders, bringing riches born of autonomous development into other areas of specialization, including participatory research practices. We are seeing the value of researching through all our senses, both inner and outer; we are holding under-determinacy in our collaborations so disappearance, emergence and transgression can take place; we are working with aesthetic representations as modes of researching practice; we value the essentially egalitarian attributes of aesthetics for their emancipatory powers; we can recognize aesthetic ways of knowing throughout the extended epistemology and into other epistemologies to revitalize them; we see how participation at first, second and third person levels of inquiry originates as aesthetics at tacitly known discontinuities through which we apprehend meaning and form. The participants are saying (SOLAR, Forum 2004):

> "By having spoken it, it creates a different possibility";
> "And yet you are very present – you are encouraging me to
> look at and feel those things – and I have been running
> away from it – that is not where I want to be – I am being
> drawn back by the connectedness I feel with you and your
> lack of description of it"; "So it can exist even without the
> words".

Summary

This paper proposes that action research practices are inherently aesthetic, and that our practices become more powerful when we acknowledge that this is the case. To do so, requires overcoming aesthetic muteness inherited in the post-Enlightenment devaluation of tacit knowing which is still preserved in many of the discipline-based frameworks through which we understand action research.

Current action research practices deploy aesthetics overtly in the use of arts-based methods, and more subtly in constructions of our field such as Saarnivaara's reflexive language, in the apprehension of any theoretical construction drawn from the messiness of grounded practice, and most distinctly in reference to Heron and Reason's Extended Epistemology. The latter identifies aesthetic references to pattern making, sensory alertness and the power of beauty inherent in a participatory worldview. Aesthetics is involved in the formulating and use of such theories of practice and in the ways of being human that they induce and value. My proposition is that this coherence between aesthetics and participatory practices indicates that aesthetics may be the origin of participation, and recursively, participation that of aesthetics. To be unaware of this possibility emaciates the participatory potential of our practices. Of course, action researchers can practice with no interest in aesthetics, but, as I argue following Polanyi and Seel, aesthetic perception is inalienable from existence, inalienable from practice. Being unaware of it is working half blind to ourselves and each other. Being aware of aesthetics opens a highly considered and dynamic resource to strengthen practice and that which it generates.

Looking across to the field of aesthetics, currently distant from that of action research, we see an unfolding of its own historical self as described by Seel, which curiously parallels the emergence of participatory capabilities when we view aesthetics through our action research practice lens. Seel's history takes us from early pre-Enlightenment origins which celebrated shared powers of human perception, through many twists and turns for two hundred and fifty years, each highlighting equivalent aspects of participatory developments. It comes to rest at Seel's current insight that aesthetic perception enables epistemological freedom and innovative emergence. Action research is also currently interested in epistemological transformation as Heron and Reason's Extended Epistemology gives evidence to. I point out that it is at these scales of transformation, paradoxically minute in the moment and cosmological in their scope, that the two fields of aesthetics and action research become inseparable.

When brought to two accounts of participatory events, one addressing a sustainability matter (the turtle story), the other questioning aesthetics in action research practices (the community development story), we can see that by applying aesthetic lenses to our work we value that which may go unnoticed and by so doing change the form, meaning and movement of that which comes into being. It requires a sensitivity to both structural and non-structural aspects of a fluid-dynamic reality, and a practice capability to embrace such fluidity (or under-determination) to allow the unknown to come into multiple presences through and to us. This capacity is shared between us as practitioners and co-researchers, but we tend not to name it as aesthetics. Indeed, to do so in most practice environments is felt as elitist and irrelevant to pragmatic concerns.

To address this incoherence, I suggest an "enriched epistemology of aesthetics" which integrates Heron and Reason's Extended Epistemology with Seel's Aesthetic Perception. I devise a thread of principle to weave through two propositions, one by Heron and the other by Seel. The weaving principle is the practitioner's tacit sensitivity to distinctions, through which meaning as form is apprehended, and through which conceptual movement stirs. The

idea of meaning as form enabling cognitive and sociological movement is a proposition originated by the aesthetic philosopher, Heidegger, in the earlier years of the twentieth century. Working through the Enriched Epistemology in my engagement with aesthetics in our research practices I unfold my argument through an account of aesthetic Experience in response to an image of a disfigured turtle, into the Presenting forms of aesthetics that this experience had for a group of workshop participants and myself, then on into an integration of a history of aesthetics through Seel, with Propositions of participatory practices, to conclude with an account of aesthetics in participatory Practices as manifested in the forum event.

In the analysis and as expressed by the participants, participation does indeed become illuminating, powerfully felt at tacit, sensory, and emotional dimensions of knowing, imaginatively connective, refreshingly alert to human values and healthy habitat, and perceptively transporting in unfamiliar ways. There are obvious, tantalizing parallels in each field, which when brought together even in a preliminary treatment such as this paper encompasses, have much to offer each other. Research practices of this kind include allowing for under-determination, apparently irrational connections that can be felt intuitively and which reveal wisdom in time, the acceptance of pain as a form of beauty, allowing for the emergence of knowing and being at epistemological and ontological scales of transformation, and valuing participants in their expression of sense, sense making and sensitivity to the energies that are generated in the working of meaning into form.

Aesthetics in our action research practices shift the logoi of the world by overcoming aesthetic muteness, which enables the explication of those things that are naturally good for humanity and the identification of those that are harmful. Such a practice encourages the appreciative engagement of humanity with the unfolding of ways of knowing that would otherwise remain unseen, undervalued or limited to the hidden oppression of dominating epistemologies and ontologies. At this time in human history, when we need to know ourselves and our place in the

world so differently, aesthetics in our research practice have never been more essential.

Acknowledgement

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Biography

Dr Susan Goff is a participatory action research practitioner and theorist. She specialises in social ecology fields, with particular interest in cross-cultural methodologies with First Nations peoples in Australia. Susan has been actively involved in ALARA since 1996 variously as Board member, President, Editor of the journal and now Publications Coordinator. Following 23 years as Director of action research consultancy, CultureShift Pty Ltd, she is currently working in policy research for the Commonwealth government.

Contact: susan.goff@bigpond.com

How does digital marketing influence purchase intention? An action researcher reflexive narrative

Preetee Shalinee Gopee and Hamed Shamma

Abstract

Digitalisation is shaking traditional seller-buyer relations to the core, empowering buyers to play a larger role as arbitrators of what influences their purchase intention. There exist substantial differences between how sellers influence purchase intention, and how buyers shape their own intention to purchase. To address the divergences, this study adopts an insider action research (IAR) approach, intervening with marketers to explore the influence of digital marketing on purchase intention. It supports a qualitative research mandate that encourages the creation of purposeful theories grounded in practice. It surmises that embracing digital marketing to satisfy an increasing need for data could breed false complacency when buyer behavioural patterns are in flux. The study essentially supposes that thinking through issues as they emerge in the organisation's internal and external environments, and the buyers and events within these settings, could foster a reflexive practice that critically inquires 'How does digital marketing influence purchase intention?'

Key words: Digital marketing, purchaser intention, action research, insider action research, reflexivity

What is known about the topic?

Organizations are rapidly adopting marketing automation as a data-driven approach to improve marketing effectiveness in a manner that is meaningful to the buyers as well as profitable to the firm.

What does this paper add?

This paper reckons data alone does not altogether influence purchase intention. It opens marketing to reflexivity and encourages marketers to think in the action of designing digital marketing activities.

Who will benefit from its content?

Marketing practitioners and research scholars.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

- Invite scholars to consider if marketing is too positivist for AR, whether or not marketing practice is ready for AL and AR, and the AR design best suited for the field of digital marketing.

- Reflexivity is imperative to uncovering 'what' antecedent variables can influence purchase intention and to help practitioners in better understanding 'how' does digital marketing influence purchase intention.

Introduction

Digital is increasingly being integrated with marketing in a manner that is meaningful to the buyer, as well as profitable to the firm. Organisations are investing heavily in digital technologies to gain deeper insights into what motivate buyers. Marketing leaders are building in-house digital media and analytics capacities as they come to realize the usefulness of digital in capturing huge amounts of data on interactivity between buyers and brands (Dahlström and Edelman, 2013). However, in the process of embracing data-driven marketing, marketers may become so fixated on gathering the perfect data that they turn oblivious to latent, yet vital, triggers of purchase intention. This paper appreciates a marketing approach structured around data has the potency to induce precision in marketing execution, yet akin to Sorofman and Frank (2014), it reckons data alone does not altogether influence purchase intention.

This paper posits that it is one thing for marketing organisations to take an inside-out perspective, engaging in experimental spending and measuring the sales impact of digital tactics, still it is another to apply an outside-in approach, investing in digital in a way that influences purchase intention incrementally over the purchase journey. Gordon and Perrey (2015) refer to an investigative study that found substantial differences between how organisations and buyers think along their purchasing paths. Smith (2007), cited in Wymbs (2011, p. 94), note that marketers can 'use digital technologies to foster an integrated, targeted and measurable communication that helps acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them'. This paper acknowledges the rapid adoption of marketing automation as a data-driven approach to improve marketing effectiveness (Biegel, 2009). Howbeit, meaningful marketing intelligence lies at the intersection of the analytical self and the emotional self (Sorofman and Frank, 2014). The current paper subscribes to the observation made by Arndt (1985, p. 11) 'Marketing thinking is profoundly dominated by the empiricist world view and the logical empiricist paradigm.' In a similar vein with the author, it argues that marketing can be enriched by opening up to reflexivity, and therefore encourages marketers to explore their personal context in order to identify their assumptions, biases, and the way they think in the action of designing digital marketing activities.

In their review of research methodologies used in marketing papers between 1990 and 2009, Daugherty Hoffman & Kennedy (2015) found an increasing adherence to scientific methodologies and little methodological diversity despite the growing complexity of marketing. The authors recommend exploring alternative research approaches that consider paradigms such as contextual realism. Arndt (1985) recommends having a more open attitude towards alternative paradigms that capture subjective experiences. The current paper is in alignment with Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire (2003) in that research conducted in the absence of stakeholder collaboration may be more narrow in their insights. This study espouses a research philosophy that places emphasis on

relevance and validity tested in action, rather than one anchored in objectivity and controlled environments.

This study identified Action Research (AR) as a plausible research methodology, considering literature indicates action research brings theoretical knowledge as well as breadth of experience, lays emphasis on applicability, deems practical knowledge resides foremost with practitioners than with scholars in ever-evolving fields of study, and adds to the philosophy of practical knowing (Susman and Evered, 1978; Daniel and Wilson 2004, p. 356; Barton, Stephens & Haslett, 2009). This study supposes an AR project from the inside would foster critical reflexivity among marketers and motivate them to probe their perceptions of the new digital reality, thereby inspiring them to reflect on 'how do they know what they know?'. Heeding of a method of interactive critical inquiry, this study employed personal qualitative interviews as setups wherein each marketer was encouraged to reflect critically on how their situated position and decision impact the design of digital marketing activities, while inquiring how the activities influence predisposition to purchase. This paper believes understanding the 'how' is fundamental to uncovering 'what' antecedent variables can influence purchase intention. Combining advocacy with inquiry by the agency of practical reflexivity in an insider action research setting, this study sets out to explore **'How does digital marketing influence purchase intention?'**

Literature review

'Digital marketing is not about the technology; it is about marketers connecting with buyers to build relationships and ultimately drive sales' (Ryan and Jones, 2009, pp. 12-13). Buyers are in control, more than ever before, and marketing need to be buyer-centric to garner positive results (Ryan and Jones, 2009). Berkman and Gilson (1978), cited in Brown, Pope & Voges (2003), state buyers who express an intention to purchase a product demonstrate higher actual buying rates compared with buyers who have no purchase intention. Brown et al (2003), referring to various authors, remark that purchase intention does not *de facto*

equate to purchase behaviour. Given there generally exists a positive and significant relationship between purchase intent and purchase behaviour (Morwitz, 1991), and intention may be a predictor of any behaviour (Peña-García et al, 2020), the current research advocates listening closely to the triggers of purchase intention.

Purchase intention and digital marketing

The Internet of Things (IoT) has brought in its trail new forms of marketing such as presence-based advertising, dynamic pricing, and buyer's profile to influence cross-shopping (Chui, Löffler & Roberts, 2010). IoT is shaking the business model at this base, impelling product-focused companies to graduate from a product-development to a service-development mentality and to co-create value with their customers (Bughin, Chui & Manyika, 2015). The Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) of American Express notes marketing is cutting across all aspects of the organisation to produce cohesive customer-focused outcomes (Collins, French & Magill, 2011). As the research executive at Yahoo! observes, data-driven marketing is demystifying the assumption that marketers have a predefined knowledge of how buyers are going to behave (Collins et al, 2011). Even in cases where organisations are utilising big data to drive marketing decisions, 39% report they are not capable of converting the wealth of data into actionable insights (Kumar et al, 2013). Inasmuch as buyer behaviour is changing rapidly, and so rendering historical data almost obsolete, marketers are reverting to mass- from data-centric-marketing (Bibby et al, 2021).

Dahlström and Edelman (2013) recommend three practical solutions to excel in digital marketing: (i) employ use case scenarios to create engagement and interaction; (ii) capture behaviour-linked data; and (iii) develop capabilities across the organisation to help transform the delivery of brand experiences. 'Quarterly Digital Intelligence Briefing: Digital Trends 2015', a report by Econsultancy in association with Adobe, states around 78% of organisations surveyed worldwide are preoccupied with creating the ultimate online customer experience and they cite

value creation as a competitive differentiator. While this paper appreciates the effort businesses are making in acquiring advanced buyer-relationship-management tools to uncover points of maximum influence along the sales cycle, it also underscores an urgency for considering the buyer's circumstantial and situational particulars when designing digital marketing activities.

Purchase intention, a customer's prerogative

Digitalization is making buyers more information-empowered and enabling them to dictate when, where, and how they engage with sellers (Ostrom et al, 2015 cited in Alamäki and Korpela, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2016; Deloitte, 2014). Viewed in this light, each event signalling an intention to buy is as important as the purchase itself and deserves due attention. Drawing from Gao et al (2012), purchase decisions driven by conscious thoughts are usually based on stereotyped facts, but the unconscious processing of contextual information may also have a strong influence on a buy decision. This study deems that the bottom-up principle of unconscious thought explained in Gao et al (2012) depicts an incremental evaluation of modular values in making a purchase. It upholds that prior to making a purchase the buyer engages in unconscious thought forming impressions about perceived values that in turn shape their intention to purchase the offering. This supposition falls in line with the Theory of Reasoned Action, which augurs 'the intention to behave is the prime determinant of the actual behaviour' (van der Heijden, Verhagen & Creemers, 2003). Even if purchase intention does not imply actual purchase, it does carry predictive usefulness (Brown et al, 2003).

Digital marketing and financial services institutions

The global financial meltdown (circa 2007/2008) has in some way fast-tracked the shift from traditional marketing to digital marketing (Daj and Chrica, 2009). Marketers at financial services institutions (FSIs) have since realized the potential of digital to develop internal efficiencies, increase buyer insights, and drive revenue through healthier marketing-digital integration at relatively lower costs. Moreover, the ease to measure the return on

marketing investments (ROMI) enhances the attractiveness of digital marketing. While studies relating to the impact of digital marketing on sales at financial services institutions abound, this paper seeks to make its own contribution by asking 'how does marketers at FSIs ensure the digital activities they design are substantively influencing purchase intentions?'

Berman (2014) observes that while FSIs are on the path of digital-first marketing, the question is whether they are moving in step with their buyer, namely the financial advisor (FA). A survey by Kasina in 2014 entitled 'What advisors do online' found nearly 50% of the FAs surveyed look for personalized content. Contrarily, only 27.3% of FSIs adapt their website to the needs and interests of the financial advisors. Priem (2007) remarks that most of the now defunct dotcoms neglected to understand and deliver on the drivers of value. Drawing from Priem, this study augurs that financial services institutions may have the ability to create more sustainable sales if the FSIs make an effort to appreciate the influence utilitarian and hedonic factors have on the financial advisor's intention to purchase financial products.

Financial services institutions are investing heavily in data-driven extrapolations and statistical heuristics, with the objective to assist their marketing teams in developing impactful digital marketing activities. Looking across different industries, Edelman (2010) notes there are only a few organisations that use the intelligence derived from digital analytics to create customer-centric value. This study perceives analytical models are designed based on beliefs of linearity in purchase behaviours. Technology has transformed purchasing decisions from linear vertically integrated to a multisided networked process. Measuring the effects of marketing activities goes beyond linking point of proposition with point of exchange. Companies must build tighter linkages between digital insights and action (Edelman, 2010). Yadav and Pavlou (2014), after organising and synthesising findings from existing literature around interactions in a computer-mediated environment, found that research on consumer-firm interaction tends to gravitate towards the technological elements of digital marketing, such as network navigation, technology-enabled

search, and technology-enabled decision making. This paper intends to take digital marketing discussions out of the realm of technology into one where marketers are encouraged to take a reflexive approach when designing digital marketing activities, whereby how to redirect marketing dollars to activities bearing greater influence on predispositions to purchase. This study urges marketers to view financial advisors as: (i) arbitrators of the firm's digital marketing activities; (ii) selectors of digital marketing tactics; and (iii) experts on elements (referred as 'value dimensions' in this study) influencing their purchase intention.

Value dimensions framework

This study proposes an open architecture framework and welcomes academics as well as practitioners to contribute to its development. The framework put forward in Figure 1 is adapted from the Sheth-Newman Gross Model of Consumption Values.
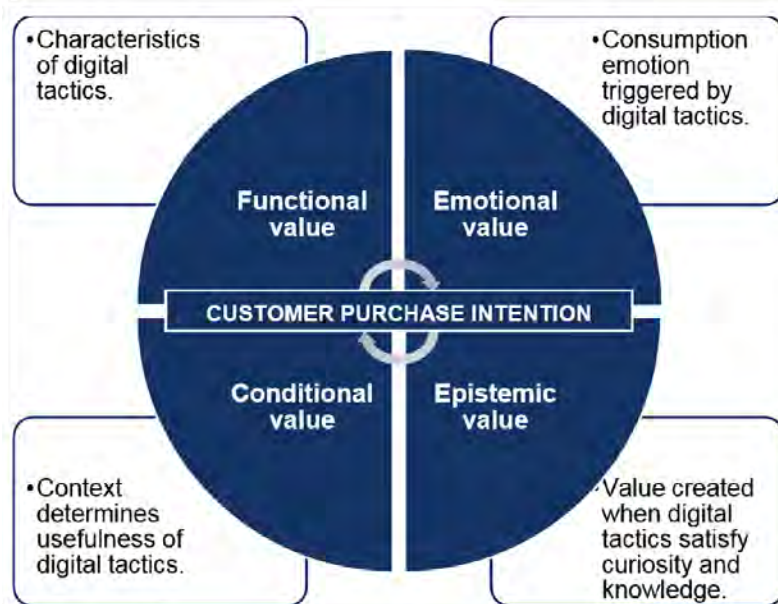

Figure 1. Value dimensions: A proposed framework

Regression results from a study conducted by Aboagye et al (2016) showed that the Sheth-Newman Gross Model of Consumption Values was significant in predicting customers' e-banking adoption in Ghana. The Sheth-Newman Gross Model of Consumption Values provides five core dimensions representing broad feelings that influence choice behaviour: (i) functional value, (ii) emotional value, (iii) conditional value, (iv) epistemic value and (v) social value. Social value, which is expressed in terms of culture/ethnic, socio-economic and reference groups, is beyond the scope of this study and has been excluded from the proposed framework. Drawing from the expectations' confirmation paradigm mentioned in Claudia (2012), the current paper infers the satisfaction buyers derive from softer value dimensions could also be a predictor of their predisposition to purchase. This study reckons there are unexplored advantages in combining the more traditional digital functional dimensions (e.g. interactivity and ease of use) with emerging psychological dimensions (e.g. curiosity, knowledge, and trust).

Functional value

'Functional value' is derived from the salient functional and utilitarian features embedded in the digital activities. 'Interactivity', 'ease of use', and 'usefulness' are dimensions elected to represent 'functional value'.

Leveraging the concept of interactivity, Liao and Keng (2014) found that Online Consumer Experiences (OCEs) could increase purchase intention. 'Interactivity' is expressed in terms of responsiveness attributes allowing real-time, circular seller-buyer-seller interactions. 'Ease of use' is the effort required to perform tasks such as online information search and accessing new ideas (Bouhlel et al, 2010). 'Usefulness' pertains to direct benefits customers receive from digital marketing (Bouhlel et al, 2010). According to Tan et al (2010), cited in Aboagye et al (2016), prioritising the determinants of e-banking and m-banking adoption – perceived usefulness, ease of use, and technological efficacy – are key for developing appropriate digital strategies.

Emotional value

Aboagye et al (2016) remark that emotional intelligence is emerging as a critical factor in the marketing of banking products. The authors, bringing up several studies, posit the degree of e-loyalty is determined by the level of e-satisfaction and e-trust, and the quality of e-service. In this study, emotional intelligence is construed by expressions of emotion elicited from engaging with digital marketing activities.

Conditional value

Faroughian et al. (2012), cited in Aboagye et al (2016), define conditional value in terms of 'perceived utility acquired by an alternative as a result of the specific situation or set of circumstances facing the choice maker' (p. 39). The IoT has helped reduce information asymmetry between FSIs and their FAs. Beckett, Hewer & Howcroft (2000) remark that customer behaviour models assume that information is freely and readily available. Hence, marketers should ensure information conveyed to FAs through any digital marketing activity is perceived useful by the recipient. For that matter, this study maintains it is imperative to understand the financial advisor's contextual and situational information needs.

Epistemic value

This value dimension is described as the value buyers acquire when their desire for knowledge is satisfied and curiosity for novel content is aroused. Previous research has indicated a positive link between epistemic value and purchase intention in the case of information systems or mobile-related products/services (Wang, Liao & Yang, 2013). The current paper argues there is value in using digital tools for imparting information to financial advisors, the digital activities should be designed in a manner that they arouse the FAs' curiosity and influence their purchase intent through a sense of knowledge satisfaction.

Methodology

Dougherty (1992), cited in Mohrman, Gibson & Mohrman (2001), notes practitioners have trouble turning model-based, abstract research findings into real practice. This study favours a research mandate closer to practice and a methodology inclusive of the organisation's context. It concurs with November (2004) in that marketing generally employs scientific research methodologies, but the measurement systems marketing research uses lack the precision of those of classical sciences. Drawing from Wind and Maharajan (2002), this study supports fostering a culture of adaptive experimentation and learning within the setting of the organisation, while concurrently executing the digital marketing activities.

Ontological and epistemological positions

An ontological position assumes the existence of causal relations between the measurable attributes of discrete entities and activities (Mingers, 2003). A marketing ontology for purchase intent could embody a single customer type connected to a single product classification by one relationship link labelled 'buy' (Zhou et al, 2006). The current paper concurs with Chandrasekaran, Josephson & Benjamins (1999) that knowledge created exclusively through ontological assumptions would unlikely cover all possible realities and be applicable to all situations. This research perceives an ontology-derived knowledge could at best provide factual knowledge about the objective realities in the digital marketing domain. Drawing from scholars (Wong, Musa & Wong, 2011; Holden and Lynch, 2004), the present study posits that digital reality is in large part a subjective phenomenon existing in the marketer's mind, and conceptualised from cognitive processes. It agrees with Hatchuel (2005) therein knowledge and action are developing together, therefore building future action from previous knowledge would arguably be limiting. Inspired by the investor George Soros, who sees the finance discipline as a multi-person game with himself as a participant, and who believes people are influenced by their biases and observers do influence

the financial system (Umpleby, 2007), the current paper suggests marketers should adopt reflexivity and look for biaises in their perception of what makes digital marketing.

An action research framework

This research employs critically reflexive questioning to uncover any latent assumptions marketers potentially make about digital marketing, and that could influence the design of digital activities. Cunliffe (2004) notes that critically reflexive questioning draws on assumptions of social constructionism to reveal the subjective, multiple, and constructed realities of the world. The study frames the intervention within a participatory and democratic process of action research, shifting between planes of actions and reflections. It aims to shift the marketer's frame of reference from pillar to post between the theoretical knowledge they have come to espouse and their actions in practice. Drawing from Mohrman et al (2001), this paper believes collaborative research between practitioners and researchers, contrary to laboratory-like scientific research approaches, will better help understand the evolving digital marketing phenomenon. It views the creation of practical knowledge to be deeply rooted in the subjectivist experience of reality, and invites scholars studying digital marketing to embrace action research even for its debatable lack of positivist objectivism. This study expresses support to action research for its inclusive research process, promoting democratic and emancipatory inquiry through the participation of actors.

An action research approach

Practitioners operating in complex and dynamic systems are often pressured for solutions that instantly deliver the organisation's desired outcomes. In constrained situations, expedited decisions are more likely to be made based on 'what' is already known, as opposed to 'how' it has been known. Practitioners may find greater comfort in imposing their own interpretations on the action itself, against reflecting in their motivation of the action. Inferring from Daniel and Wilson (2004), it is essential for researchers to grasp the conceptualisations practitioners make and appreciate it as a source

of practical insight. The current paper concurs with Mohrman et al (2001, p. 357) that '…usefulness of research depends, in part, on the extent to which the perspectives of organisation members are included in research processes and the results are incorporated into those members' organisation design activities that occur as their organisation adjusts to its changing environment.' Theory generated through practice has the dual advantage of informing practice and achieving positive organisational change.

Action research is appropriate for evolving phenomenon such as digital marketing because of its: (i) emphasis on immediacy of outcome; (ii) future orientation; (iii) respect for practitioners as co-producers of knowledge; and (iv) cyclical process. Action researchers engage with practitioners, bring practice and theory together and join action with reflection in the pursuit of finding practical solutions to emerging issues. The purpose of this paper is to explore an attitude of inquiry into the social reality of the digital marketing phenomenon to contribute towards furthering the development of digital marketing both from a practical and an academic perspective. This AR project encourages marketers to ask themselves: 'How do I know what I know about digital marketing?' and 'How do I know what I know, with respect to the financial advisor's perception of digital marketing?'

Action research in digital marketing

The strategic intent of action research is to impart changes on practice raises questions regarding who and/or what to change in effect and whose interests are to be served (Ballantyne, 2004). A form of inquiry starting with praxis grounded in the actions of the practitioners and involving critical reflections about consequences of actions could provide the basis for addressing these questions. The evolving phenomenon argument is reflected in Ballantyne (2004), who undertook an AR project to create a sound body of knowledge for substantiating what service improvements are essential to customers. The digital ecosystem, because of its dynamism and constant evolution, opens itself to action research encouraging marketers to evaluate their reconstructed understanding of digital marketing through personal and

collaborative inquiries. AR is a powerful methodology for uncovering perceptions and preunderstandings that define digital marketing actions, building shared meanings, as well for generating knowledge valid to both practitioners and scholars. However, Kates and Robertson (2004) argue that 'action research methodology requires serious consideration of specific organisational issues before being introduced into marketing contexts.' Ballantyne (2004) claims action research, just as with marketing, is a political activity in the sense that an emancipatory approach to action research could be frowned upon in organisations where knowledge creation is left to executives.

An action research intervention

Research in the field of marketing puts more emphasis on the role of deductive reasoning, which is making inferences and drawing conclusions from pre-determined research constructs (Bonoma, 1985). The author notes that studies that have been conducted outside of the practitioner's natural environment may not factor in issues of significant importance to them. Heeding Bonoma's observation, this study adopts a process of discovery to explore the digital experience within its social context. Therefore, to problematize the issue, this study moves away from deductive theory-testing methodologies towards an inductive approach contained in reflexivity. It espouses Foucault's conceptualisation of problematization, cited in Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, p. 253), that 'an endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of what is already known'. Inspired by Alvesson and Sandberg (2011), this study enters in a dialectical interrogation with other theoretical positions to challenge the assumptions the marketers are making. It concurs with Alvesson and Sandberg (2011) that problematization contributes to more reflective scholarship by challenging assumptions underlying extent theories. Instead of purist approaches, this study employs combinations of problematization and reflexivity to make the issue contextually relevant.

This paper contends reflexive questions such as 'Can marketers cogently explain why they are implementing digital marketing the

way they are?' may be better explored when researchers are situated in the research setting alongside the participants. Insider action research allows the researchers to be part of the ongoing digital marketing discussions, to capture the digital-marketing vernacular of the marketers, and to experience how the practitioners are designing digital marketing activities to accomplish the firm's goals. This study stands from a perspective of digital marketing practice grounded in human contexts and evolving with situational particulars. It feels a compelling need to explore how marketers employ data to design impactful digital activities; how they ensure these activities resonate with the FAs; how is purchase intent influenced in a process of exchange between marketers and financial advisors; and ultimately to address the research question, is the firm's digital marketing initiatives in effect influencing the financial advisors' intent to purchase its products?

First-person insider action research

The insider action research approach distinguishes itself from an external-researcher approach in that insider action researchers are practitioners immersed in the organisation's setting (Coghlan, 2001). IAR establishes a strong platform for researchers to capture data through objective observation as well as subjectively through their native role as practitioners. Given the unique position of digital marketing and its rapid emergence into mainstream marketing, a participatory, democratic research process that connects academic theorising and digital marketing practice, in favour of a common objective to develop actionable knowledge, is worth exploring. Discussions around digital activities have been happening haphazardly and sporadically in a fragmented manner, triggering unintentional siloed thinking among marketing practitioners. Moreover, pressure on marketers to capture market shares and other short-term performance outcomes does not leave much room for a reflexive practice, leading practitioners to resort to an empiricist hypotheticodeductive decision-making approach.

According to Brannick and Coghlan (2007), insider research can be carried out within any of positivism and hermeneutics action

research paradigms. This study does not adopt a hermeneutic approach, nor conducts a research in the form of Hawthorne experiments. It assumes conducting the study as an inquiry from the inside helps explore the dominant positivism attitude, while concurrently pushing the research agenda for critical reflexivity. A review of extant literature has led to infer that scholars have a strong tendency to adopt positivist research focus in customer behaviour and related studies. Marketing research has often stayed away from non-positivist methods, in part owing to its long-standing commitment to the method of positivist science (Hirschman, 1986). Empirical emphasis in marketing research is in a sense defined by a view of marketing as a physical exchange mechanism producing economic benefits, such as profitability, cost minimisation, and marginal returns. However, marketing is evolving, and the marketing discipline is acknowledging the significance of situational context, subjective perceptions, and multiple realities in designing marketing activities.

Generating and capturing data

Qualitative interviewing encourages each participant to share thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon and in-depth information about the individual experiences of the interviewees (Rubin and Rubin, 2012; DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Creswell and Miller, 2000). Qualitative analysis places a strong emphasis on describing reality as it is perceived by the individual actor (Dey, 1993). Descriptions, as Dey remarks, are related to the actors' intentions, the context in which the action takes place, and the process in which action is embedded. Engaging in dyadic dialogues with the research participants using one-on-one, face-to-face semi-structured interview would help uncover subjective meanings and co-create new meanings of the digital marketing phenomenon.

The study used purposeful sampling, which involved selecting information-rich research participants with diverse digital marketing experiences. The sample comprised of seven participants for the AR inquiry, who are senior marketing practitioners from a FSI in Canada and are responsible for different

digital marketing activities, including marketing strategy, digital content and engagement, search engine management and optimisation, social media, and digital marketing. The sampling strategy includes the full range of digital marketing functions to ensure that distinct voices were given an opportunity to share their unique experiences so as to maximise opportunities for gaining a broader and deeper appreciation of the digital marketing phenomena.

This research uses a thematic analysis technique to draw thick descriptions of the digital marketing phenomena from each participant's narrative. Thematic analysis involves identifying emerging themes critical to the descriptions of the phenomenon (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This technique is appropriate for interpreting the subjective meaning the participants ascribe to the digital marketing phenomenon. Drawing from Rubin and Rubin (2012), this study deconstructs the analysis into two phases. The first phase involved finding, refining, elaborating concepts, themes and events. In the second phase, the study compares the themes that emerged from the individual action inquiry session. It combines the findings collected from each interview, to build a comprehensive picture of the marketers' preconceptions of the impact digital activities have on purchase intent and to draw broader theoretical conclusions. The study proceeds with defining dynamic interrelationships among the various themes, to determine a core theme around which the other themes revolved and establishes links between the different emerging themes.

Outcomes and sense-making

The research participants indicated a greater reliance on third-party reports, industry insights and firm-generated data for keeping abreast of digital marketing. The interviewees claimed to use data from industries other than the financial sector to inform the design of their digital activities. However, they expressed concern with the latter convention, as digital marketing knowledge associated with other industries may not be directly applicable to the digital marketing efforts of financial services institutions. This

action inquiry uncovered an interpretation of digital marketing deeply seated in technology-enabled marketing. Digital is empowering marketing organisations with the technological ability to display the right content to the right audience and at the right time.

The interviewees displayed a rich picture of digital marketing that is essentially traditional marketing overlaid with digital tactics. The action inquiry showed that the marketers were detached from the soft drivers of purchase intent. There was a keen preoccupation with digital as a tool to push products on customers. Leeflang et al (2014) found 80% of companies surveyed lack the ability to link their data to variables such as sales and customer usage. This paper reckons the AR participants in this study are experiencing what Leeflang et al (2014) explained as left-brained analytical versus right-brained creativity conundrum. The right-brained marketing professionals at the firm felt less motivated to function in the firm's fact-based decision-making environment. When asked how they re-examine their marketing fundamentals, the AR participants structured their responses in terms of the technological emancipation the marketing division was undergoing. The interviewees noted they readjust their marketing beliefs and fundamentals based on data captured through the digital marketing activities.

Alternative communication channels and tools to drive sales and enhance the firm's brand and means to achieve business goals are some of the themes that surfaced from the action inquiry. However, the view of digital marketing as a digital communication channel is central to the discussions with the research participants. This research urges the marketers to reflect in their action of devising social media strategy not just as a tool to optimize marketing efforts, but also from the features embedded in social media that could influence intentions to purchase. Statements from the AR participants about what digital marketing is to the investment firm exposed a shift in their traditional role as much as the development of new knowledge happening along with the organisation's adoption and implementation of digital marketing. Likewise, the attitudes of senior executives towards digital

marketing were influenced by their positions and in-turn determining what they see of the complex phenomenon. Therefore, this study augurs the construction of digital marketing meanings is a permutation of objective reality and personal interpretation. It transpired from the reflexive dialogues that FSIs are investing in the dimensions in which they believe digitisation will have greater return on investments: product promotion, product distribution, and high-impact customers. However, it is unclear to the individual marketer which meaning or meanings their organisation wanted to pin on its digital marketing efforts: Is it technology-driven marketing? Is it a new means of engaging with financial advisors? and/or Is it a new way of conducting business?

This study has uncovered a mindset split between traditional and digital-first marketing. Practitioners with traditionalist beliefs were those with general marketing expertise and were tasked with occasional digital responsibilities. Those who took on digital marketing with a digital-first mentality were essentially marketers who are in digital-only roles. Digital-first marketers argue that the traditional marketing funnel does not operate well in a digital world, given touchpoints are intricately networked in a non-linear manner. The practitioners observed they draw their insights from traditional marketing activities and adjust the voice of the message to fit the online environment. Social media marketers are for leveraging the power of digital to foster customer trust instead of pushing products. Digital marketing practitioners insisted a digital-centric culture is imperative for the success of digital marketing. Despite the polarised beliefs, the practitioners collectively recognised the benefits in integrating its online and offline marketing activities while maintaining one common voice. Matter of fact, Porter (2001) cited in Foster (2005), emphasises the importance of coordinating emerging online with the traditionally offline strategies generally used by organisations. There was total agreement that combining digital with marketing would address the greatest growth opportunity.

The interviewees expressed the importance of interoperability between digital and marketing to make digital marketing a successful endeavour. During the reflective inquiry, the

practitioners used words such as 'digital engagement', 'financial advisors' engagement', 'customer conversion', 'interactions', 'integration', and 'product performance'. Discussions with the AR participants revolved around the way they go about executing digital marketing activities based on predetermined expectations. There is almost a positivist sense in the way the marketers implement digital marketing activities, one that is determined by return on marketing investment (ROMI). There is an apparent process of trial-and-error in selecting value dimensions that would best fit the digital marketing activities. There is a perceivable reliance on data captured from past digital activities to inform the design of future ones. The AR participants stated that data provide them with a glimpse into purchase behaviour.

There is a pressing need for leveraging existing data towards offering compelling value propositions to consumers and in the process generating new revenue streams for the firm. Although, the participants were using data derived ontologically from past experiences to verify and test new knowledge claims about digital marketing. They were practicing minimal to no epistemic reflexivity when applying data to decision-making. This study believes that marketers can keep a regular check on their assumptions in the creation of digital activities through smart analytics, just as well as epistemic reflexivity. This research encourages marketing practitioners in general to develop fresh metaphors that could help with their reflexive thinking on how to engage with reality and move beyond a traditional form of marketing grounded in positivism.

Issue diagnosis

The current research lays strong emphasis on a human-centred digital ecosystem where digital activities are created using value dimensions that are meaningful to the buyers. The AR participants concurred that better buyer experience is key to successful digital transformation. Yet, the pressure on digital marketing to close sales may be pushing marketers down a rabbit hole of scientific or pseudoscientific marketing. Marketing practitioners are falling back on second-hand data and acting on derived insights without

inasmuch asking how the data came to be. There is a rush for analytics to satisfy a need for precision: who to target, what to target with and where along the purchase journey to deploy digital activities. In its quest for exactness, marketers are wearing quantitative lenses and becoming oblivious to the nature of data. This study recognises the need to pause and reflect on whether marketers are practicing digital marketing or simply marketing in a digital world.

The AR participants viewed digital marketing as a computer-based, online channel through which they could push the firm's offerings in a more cost-effective manner on the financial advisors without so much of a consideration to the FAs intention to eventually make a purchase. No practitioner could verbalise a clear definition of digital marketing either expressed through marketing theories or conceptualised through individual experiences. The interviewees expressed an urgency to connect with each buyer (i.e., financial advisor) individually. They realise digital has reduced the financial market to a segment-of-one. Gone are the days of pushing financial products down the marketing funnel to the segment-of-many. Today's networked, information-asymmetric environment has rendered every financial advisor more attuned to what works best for their business, just as for them. However, the marketers felt digital marketing strategies are obsessed with optics, such as high numbers of visitors (e.g., for websites) or viewers (e.g., for videos). Digitalisation has made content accessible to nearly anyone at any time. With buyers taking control of their content consumption, firms operating in high-information density conditions are exploiting digital for its ability to scale without large communication networks. It is the opinion of this paper that the firm should develop content that the financial advisors can relate with and that would consequently influence their purchase intent.

The benefits of delivering time-to-market information undoubtedly enhance the attractiveness of digital channels. FSIs are investing in customer segmentation tools and deploying content using digital tactics in a manner that targets the intended customer segment. However, often time, content marketing is driven by events in the financial markets rather than informed by the FA's individual

situation. The AR participants mentioned they send large amounts of content through different digital channels to sell the firm's products. They acknowledged the significance of sending the right content to the right customer. So far, the practitioners rely mainly on in-house data and commercial studies to strategically tailor content to the financial advisor's unique need. A better understanding of each FA's circumstance may be best achieved by reflecting in the action of creating, implementing, and executing digital initiatives. Therefore, this paper is inviting marketing professionals to engage in critical thinking with their self and other stakeholders, instead of taking data at face value.

A reflexive inquiry helped in bringing the marketers sub-consciousness to the surface. It encouraged them to expose their individual concerns, specific interests and meanings about digital marketing. The AR exercise revealed that practitioners are in fact striving to have a better understanding of what drives purchase intention in a digital ecosystem. Nevertheless, their efforts are arguably falling short of involving the buyer in ways that turn the firm's digital marketing activities into influencers of purchase intention. The marketers' approach has been predominantly positivist and managerialist. This study believes that digital marketing is a social science phenomenon, and a positivist view would be inappropriate. It supports a paradigm that encourages marketers to participate in real-world life with other stakeholders for a better understanding of the emergent properties and features of digital marketing.

Reflections and implications

Action research, by virtue of its design, may be unsuitable for organisations with hierarchical management practices (Coghlan and Shani, 2005). Such organisations tend to lean towards a control culture. Contrarily, action research stresses listening, emphasises questioning, abets reflection, endorses democratic participation, and incites practitioners to take action. This paper believes that control could also be a matter of organisational thinking. Executives in a decision-making role operate from different mental

models, which curtail their readiness to accept reflection and for that matter action researchers who raise questions for reflection. In the United States (circa 1950s), there was a prevailing belief that scientific knowledge could provide the foundation for improved managerial decision-making and upgrade the quality of business education (Whitley, 1988). Decision makers are more likely to be persuaded by espoused theories supported by quantitative techniques and remain oblivious to theories-in-action. Critical reflection becomes an afterthought in the organisation's decision-making process and any attempt to instil reflexivity would be frowned upon. Besides, there is a feeling that reflexivity and self-reflection could expose the tacit and explicit knowledge of decision-makers and in turn question their organisational digital strategies and planning.

Executives operating in fast moving environments, such as financial markets, are pressed to act faster than their immediate competitors. Action inquiry could be construed as an exhaustive process of diagnosing, planning, taking, and evaluating action. Time engagement in these cycles could limit democratic participation at all levels if senior management feels time is better utilised towards day-to-day running of the organisation. Thus, power could counteract efforts to integrate inquiry into everyday organisation action. However, action research is research with people, where members of the organisation are transformed into co-inquirers and engage in quality collaboration for generating successful outcomes.

Is digital marketing too positivist for action research?

Action research is principally about researching and intervening in real life organisational contexts, aimed at improving practice and generating relevant theoretical knowledge. Kates and Robertson (2004) remarked despite action research longevity as a recognised research methodology and its frequent use in nursing and education, and particularly management and organisational development, marketing has yet to embrace AR as a research modality. The authors posed two key questions pertinent to this study: (i) 'Is it that marketing research is simply late in recognising

the value of qualitative and interpretive perspectives?' and (ii) 'Is it that marketing is not a discipline in which action research can be successfully implemented?' With these questions in mind, this paper proceeded with reflecting on action research in the context of digital marketing. Does action research have a place in digital marketing research when companies are taking a positivist view of decision-making, which arguably hold that decision makers should have the right data to make decisions? If action research is to challenge the claims of positivism, then marketers who have acquired pseudo-scientific management knowledge and have a positivist mindset could question the relevance of Action Research as a research methodology.

Trapped in the digital rush marketing practitioners are attracted by the glittery force of data, with least consideration to its situation-specific applicability. However, in fast moving industries, such as the financial services industry, practitioners wish to have rapid guidance. Cause-and-effect data type is an easy recourse for marketing practitioners seeking an immediate answer when faced with complex events. Strategic decision-making takes the form of an incremental process of small decisions using analytical tools. A prevailing dominant positivist worldview among the interviewees disputed the contribution of a practical form of inquiry to improve digital marketing unless that practical knowing was supported by quantitative findings. There is a quiet belief that buyer behaviour analytics provide enough knowledge to put the practitioners in touch with reality and assist them with taking the right steps towards digital success. The concept of knowing as a process of coming to know in everyday experience is alien to the marketing professionals who are usually alumni of business schools emphasising positivistic, theory-validating marketing teaching. New digital marketing knowledge is largely constructed from preunderstandings of the subject shaped by traditional theories and commercial research reports that are remote from social realities.

Can digital marketing activities be created in action?

Strategic marketing is explained as the outcome of formal detailed strategic planning processes, which themselves originate from the organisational vision and missions (Iyambo and Otubanjo, 2013; Ballantyne, 2004). Action research would require senior management to espouse a more spontaneous than specific and more contingent than calculative form of strategic marketing. Accordingly, digital marketing should be reasoned as a critical process and not simply as a functional specialisation. Common to many marketing contexts, the need to react quickly to competitive threats, combined with the internal cultural and relationship issues, would decidedly impact on the success of external interventions. In an environment of ever-shifting agendas, interplay within the action-reflection cycle has the potential of producing innovative strategic orientations. However, drawing from Gummesson (2000), marketing activities are more so determined by the firm's external environment, rather than by subjective constructions, that could limit the application of action research in marketing. The author points to a disconnect between the external world where real decisions are made among stakeholders, such as the buyers, and the firm's internal reality. As Ballantyne (2004) pointed out in his AR project on customer service improvement at a major retail bank in Australia, the strategic "customer first" intent remained unchanged, but its implementation shifted according to ongoing opportunities and constraints. The deep financial recession at the time caused the organisation to reassess its priorities and eventually wound down the project. While the current AR project was not undertaken during a turbulent economic environment, yet it encountered its own demise in the face of rivalling organisational agenda. Guided by Perry and Gummesson (2004) 'letting past experience and action through later scholarly reflection become data in a research project', this study employed the retrospective action science type of action research.

Future directions of action research for digital marketing

This paper recommends that future research in digital marketing should introduce a qualitative research that encompasses practice-based realities to help interpret and make better sense of data. However, it is also conscious that marketing practitioners lack a critically reflective disposition given the pressure on them to increase market share and achieve short-term performances that may be a challenge for action researchers. This study calls on action researchers to pool practitioners from different departments, not just marketing, and look at functional interrelationships impacting what is generally deemed exclusively a marketing issue. The intent is to emphasize a marketing research that diffuse reflection-in-action across marketing and non-marketing organisational units.

This study espouses a retrospective form of action research as a future research direction in marketing, particularly in an environment where improving workgroup processes of action in real time may not be feasible. Developing substantive digital marketing theory is another responsibility of the researcher and it is recommended that future action research projects consider the generalisability of theories and concepts generated by these exercises to other marketing contexts, organizations and industries, in this case beyond the financial services sector. This study opines it will be naïve to regress the value dimensions that influence purchase intent to a set of exogenous variables. It is the belief of this paper that reflexivity is a requisite even when applying generalised findings from quantitative research to individual digital marketing situations. The financial sector is all about scientific-based interventions in pursuance of further knowledge about real-life social situations. For example, in the experimental action research (Cassell and Johnson, 2006) where the objective is to deductively retrieve causal connections that are a priori accessible. While the current paper would not overwrite the significance of action research in digital marketing at financial services institutions, it would rethink the action research modality best suited for this specific industry.

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Biographies

Preetee S. Gopee is the Founder, CEO of Kendrit Consulting, the synthesis of extensive public and private sector professional experience, that puts a premium on learning how organizations work on the inside. Her research interests are in the areas of customer centricity, reflexivity, and digital marketing. A doctoral practitioner focusing on shifts in customer needs that impact organizational objectives, then recognizing the implications of the impact and develops marketing strategies to address these implications. She works with disruptors, particular those creating groundbreaking market space, and engages organizations in becoming reflexive practice to create positive customer experience and drive value innovation.

Email: preetee.gopee@kendritconsulting.com

Hamed M. Shamma is the BP Endowed Chair and Associate Professor of Marketing at The American University in Cairo, School of Business, Egypt. His research interests are in the areas of reputation management, sustainability, retail management and marketing technology. His research appeared in various journals such as Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Journal of Product and Brand Management,

Benchmarking: An International Journal among others. He also serves on a number of editorial review boards including, Journal of Global Marketing, International Journal of Customer Relationship Marketing and Management and Benchmarking: An International Journal.

Email: shamma@aucegypt.edu

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