ALARA 2014 Australasian Conference Report

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1. Background

The intentions guiding the design and delivery of the ALARA conference 2014 include:

1. To deliver an annual ALARA conference in a business partnership between ALARA and CultureShift Pty Ltd in recognition of ALARA's diminished capacity to deliver conferences autonomously
2. To challenge the conventional purpose of conferences in recognition of the practical needs of delegates and their fields in the contemporary world's expectations and challenges
3. To develop a systemic participatory model of transformative leadership for further use within agreed arrangements.

In addition, the conference was also guided by the need to satisfy the requirements as specified in the Memorandum of Understanding established between CultureShift Pty Ltd and ALARA Inc. All these intentions were realized within the terms of the MOU, with the exception of the financial objective, as the conference resulted in a financial loss. The conference was the result of a successful partnership, experiencing minimal interpersonal difficulties and sustaining an excellent level of transparency and accountability throughout despite some of the communication challenges that are discussed.

The following report responds to the questions requested by the ALARA Management Committee and provides some additional commentary on the actual conference model.

> *The CCI is incomparable to other conferences – working in time-compressed circumstances to reveal what we cannot see – now I will see in such circumstances wherever I am (Participant feedback)*

2. The structure of the event

> Commentary on: *Holding two events that complemented each other vs the additional costs and competition for delegates' money / time (i.e. they had to choose one of the events)*

The conference design of two events was influenced by a number of factors including the chosen location, Silver Wattle, which could only accommodate 35 people at a time. It was envisioned that a minimum of 50 participants would be needed to make the annual conference financially viable.

Silver Wattle was agreed to, despite its limited carrying capacity, because the location was perfect for deeper work. It is also affordable, the hiring fee including the considerable contributions of facilities management at very modest rates. The centre is positioned to provide retreat style accommodation, while being only 40 minutes from Canberra – a point equi-distant

from most capital cities. We had hoped that marketing would reach people in all major cities so this consideration for a national conference was informed.

In addition, holding two events with two scheduling options – one on a weekend and one early week – was also intended to better accommodate the needs of people with different managerial or professional commitments at the end of the year.

There was no difficulty in finding panel members for both events, and giving participants a choice worked well even if it created confusion at registration. This was unforeseen and will need to be technically resolved should a similar approach be used again.

Some participants stayed for both events. In future, should we repeat having two events we should encourage this. However we should consider an alternate fee structure for those who attend both events. It was of great benefit to the event and the participants to enjoy the second reconstruction of the event around different and related themes.

In retrospect we believe that the significant and rich outcomes achieved at the conference would not have been possible without both topics over the entire time spread... touching on such critical issues with spaciousness and collaboration enabled huge shifts of consciousness within delegates and team members alike.

The timing of the event could be reconsidered – now that the conference is not teamed with the AGM as was initially understood to be a requirement. After October many people are in end of year pressure before signing off in December, and they cannot afford the time off, nor is there the strategic landscape immediately ahead of them to apply the outcomes. The event also clashed with the AES conference. The other events we have to plan for in the future are the ASA and AHRIA conferences.

3. The marketing strategy

> Commentary on: *The potential for confusion about getting the message across to those expecting a "conference", the marketing strategy's success and failings / problems (e.g., the broad scope of the social media vs the delay in getting it working), and what to change to improve this area in future.*

The commitment to hold the language of "conference" for this event was important and paid off with those who participated. The intention was to challenge the concept of a conference, and to provide something of greater value because of its stance in relation to conventional approaches. This approach is also consistent with AR thinking and practice, so should be promoted and used as a market distinction, in a market place saturated by conventional conferences.

The logo for the conference was generously contributed by an artist who was a contact of Helena's. This was in response to the team's early conversations about the character of the event, focusing on the Asia-Pacific emphasis on AR and AL – rather than a Eurocentric one. The conference panel was also designed to reflect this cross-cultural authenticity and capacity – however this did not appear to attract registrations from non-white participants. We checked to see if marketing was happening in NZ (via Riripeti), Pacific Nations (via Vicki), and Australian Aboriginal networks (via Bronwyn) and we received no registrations from these sources[1]. Lowtija Institute promoted the conference into Aboriginal health networks, and Celia Hodson, Bob Dick and Mark Spain promoted through their networks on websites, newsletters and e-mail

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[1] Possible reasons include changes to State and Federal Government funding arrangements for delegates from developing countries (e.g. closure of International Seminar Support Scheme)

networks. However, these efforts produced little to no results. When we checked if people from ALARA were reading the promotions it was discovered that only two members had actually opened any of the messages promoting the conference – it is quite possible that this is also true for other networks. This is a significant problem, not isolated to this event and needs to be strategically resolved before another event is considered.

When Helena undertook the event management of this contract she was of the understanding that a comprehensive marketing database was available to the event; along with established social media networks. This was not the case, so the delay in initiating the media and marketing campaign was in large part attributable to the necessity of creating a comprehensive database from scratch as well as setting up the social media platforms. This has been an additional cost to Helena who has built a valuable database for future conference events. This database includes past ALARA conference attendees and members – though much of these are out of date; and many of Susan's professional contacts.

The marketing campaign would have been more successfully managed by an experienced and well connected marketing person, however this service would have come at a far greater cost and may or may not have generated more interest in the event itself. We relied quite heavily on the panel members' active marketing of the event. This aspect was part of their letter of agreement, but it took a while to 'kick in' as it took time for the panel to become conversant with the themes and approach, thus adding a further delay to the marketing success.

Most of the participation came from contacts made via LinkedIn. A challenge that we faced in the social media campaign is that people's personal LinkedIn and Facebook contacts could not be added to a database as we do not automatically have their direct contact details or subscriptions. So this created a double work load for some team members and potential delegates.

There was an effort to carry out a direct media campaign (radio, twitter, newspapers and TV) however the fit was not good enough for a viable strategy. This deserves more thinking as the opportunity exists, but the way in which AR and AL can be spoken about to the general public is a new challenge.

Our approach to discussing the event with potential participants was to adopt an inquiry narrative – describing the challenges facing Action Researchers in the current circumstances, the conference approach, and intended outcomes. It took a while for panellists and team members, including ALARA committee members, to find a way to speak of the event, and by the time we had it confidently and smoothly on the tongue, the event submissions were closed. We were struck by how many conversations we had with people outside of the ALARA network and how approximately half submissions came from non-members. In other words, from an early stage the social media campaign and CultureShift networks were generating good capacity for the event. This has extended knowledge of ALARA way beyond ALARA membership and we have a database of people keen to know when the next event will be delivered.

Many people experienced difficulty in registering for the event; we know of one participant who would have given up if it were not for their commitment to Susan to attend. They phoned Helena and voiced considerable concern about the registration process. This may have been a challenge for more than one potential registrant and it is possible that the conference lost some participants due to this..

It is important to note that most of the establishment work for social media has now been completed and is able to be initiated with ease for the next event.

Establishing a media and marketing strategy, with clear delineations and responsibilities with the whole event team at the outset would be an advantage for the next event.

4. The event

Commentary on: *The conduct, outcomes, successes, and ways to improve for future events*

The event itself was exceptional in content and conduct.

The development of the event was systemic: calls for submissions then established a community of engagement through the use of a yammer site, which enabled contributors to meet panel members and conference team members, and observe how their contributions were being used for the event.

15 submissions were received – 8 for theme 1 and 7 for theme 2. Panellists were invited to co-create the conversion of submissions into hypothetical narratives. However, at a teleconference the panellists delegated this role to Susan and Ross, who worked through some 3 drafts, using the submissions to build the scenarios. All work in preparation of the drafts was voluntary. For this conference design, the narratives needed to be recognisable to all regardless of their discipline or culture, and needed to embed the systemic challenges identified in the submissions so that the contributors' current challenges could be recognized and worked with during the conference.

The scenarios were then reviewed by the panellists to ensure their familiarity prior to the conference. No changes were made at that point, however the scenarios were posted on yammer to enable contributors to see how their submissions were used. These engaging approaches enabled connection and helped the community to grow and to support marketing. However in reality the narratives were only minimally accessed by panellists and contributors alike.

> *"The CCI has shown me what it takes to make collaboration effective and carry out change through inquiry" (Participant feedback)*

Contributors needed support to get through the university requirement of "presenting" their research – which simply required a formal letter of acceptance following the conference team and panellists' reading of their submissions. This took place prior to Early Bird deadlines, however we extended the deadline in the hope that those whose submissions had been accepted would encourage others to attend. It is unclear the extent to which this happened as there were only 24 registrants.

The creation of the conference program was an important piece of work as it needed to explain the approach without becoming too technical, as well as guide engagement, for delegates when in process. It did this very successfully to the extent that people read it. The program was introduced at the pre-conference dinner, however people may not have further engaged with it until the moment its elements were needed when in conference.

The pre-conference dinners and Welcome to Country were excellent. The opportunity to meet each other and share food, while in Shane Mortimer's company was most appreciated. The Smoking Ceremony under the stars at night allowed for quiet, thoughtful connection with Australia's history and soul as a basis for approaching the conference's emergent spaces and its reflexive lessons.

> *"This was an exercise in embodied design: I now engage with others with the theory alive in my body" (Participant feedback)*

The first theme experienced some challenges due to the inexperience of the panel and team in managing the design. The transparency and openhearted communications of the team and the participants in addressing the challenges was a joy to behold, an art form in evolution! Holding a preparatory day between panel members and conference co-facilitators prior to each event was essential, and enabled the panel members and two conference co-facilitators to understand each other's roles, the design of the event and to step up and into the roles of co-designing methodology in full view of scrutinizing peers. The way in which the team addressed these challenges and overcame them for the second event was exceptional and smoothly integrated, highlighting the calibre of all involved.

The role of the co-facilitators was very specific and was limited to 'holding the space' and caring for the design itself thus allowing the panellists and participants to be responsible for the facilitation. More will be written about this as the event is theorized by Susan and Ross, however significant shifts in power relationships and practices of engagement took place and will continue to do so whenever this form of facilitation is used.

The event carefully used its time, allowing very generous relaxation and reflection periods (30 minute morning and afternoon teas, 1 hour lunches, and shared dinners both before the event started and at the end of Day 1). These times offered delegates and panellists alike, moments of recovery, reflection and relaxed enjoyment in the venue and time to make sense of their experience in the conference program, which is where the real change work happened. **This focus on embodied and experiential learning throughout the two days, supported by a self-determining conference community network finding its own water level with its members, enabled people to reach for and find their own 'fit for purpose' learning from the event.** People met their own challenges relative to their concerns and cases, and had the benefit of walking in the shoes of the participants in their own projects through the role-playing aspects of the scenarios. This insider/outsider perspective enabled strong experiential learning working with explicit theories of AR practice, while also provoking their own assumptions about what they could see, interpret, and make use of without being instructed to do so. In this sense the themes of self-determination and functional reform were not only the focus of observed practice, but also participants' own embodied engagement. We believe that this cohering, multi-dimensionality afforded by the design of an emergent space is ground breaking, and makes this event a significant achievement.

> *"The CCI is both fictional and so real – it is so rich" (Participant feedback)*

For a future event with larger registration numbers the distance from the airport and the necessity for off-site accommodations must be considered. A more spacious venue for larger delegate numbers and ready access to taxi driver/runner for the entire event would be desirable. However, the choice of venue so that it offers retreat benefits is important to the value of the event and its success.

> ***A participant perspective***
> *Although I bought my ALARA and CultureShift interests, I attended the conference wholeheartedly as a participant, ready to engage with others and to immerse in the experience that it was designed to offer. I had been involved in early CultureShift deliberations and planning, so I had a sense of what the conference was intended to offer and I was excited about this, but I really did not know how it would unfold.*
> *From the start I greatly enjoyed the challenge of the process – definitely no ordinary conference. The opening dinner and smoking ceremony was particularly memorable, and*

solidly set a tone of the event that was inclusive, respectful and egalitarian. There was a great deal of rich conversation with the small but diverse group of delegates and panel, and it was clear that the process was offering opportunity for deep reflection and exploration in a way that would be professionally rewarding. It's not to say that the process was easy to navigate. At times it was difficult, and the struggle for clarity and direction was evident, and even frustrating for some. However, I came to realise that as a microcosm of the challenges in our own work, the process in effect held up a mirror to the kinds of concerns and feelings that can be experienced by others as we seek to engage them in participatory, self-determining work. The conference event had boundaries and intentions, but the way we engaged in it, and the direction we took was truly an exercise in collaboration and self-determination. Living the principles of AR/AL is easy to say, and much more challenging to do. As a practitioner it requires a degree of explicit awareness about things that are in most part deeply embedded and transparent. For example, as the event unfolded I found myself continuing to reflect on questions of privilege and self-determination and how both show up in my own life and practice: To what extent am I self-determining? How does this show up in my approach to my work? How does the privilege of my own experience influence my ability to work in situations that are differently privileged? How can I work with others in a way that deconstructs privilege? What does all this truly mean to my approach and methodology?

Now, three months down the track from the conference experience, these questions have stayed with me and continue to influence my choices and approach. More so than most of my other conference experiences, this 'very different' conference offered me something of enduring value – challenging conversations, deep connections, questions and new awareness's that will continue to influence my approach." Vicki Vaartjes 1/2/2105

Other participant comments collected in evaluations are as follows:

- *I now understand the complexity of complexity as held by others*
- *The CCI has shown me what it takes to make collaboration effective and carry out change through inquiry*
- *The CCI is creative, it is a new innovation in conferencing and entirely transferrable*
- *I am now going away with a consciously open mind*
- *The brick wall I was facing has become a window*
- *The CCI is both fictional and so real – it is so rich*
- *I loved the role-play based on real data: I can do that*
- *The CCI is incomparable to other conferences – working in time compressed circumstances to reveal what we cannot see – now I will see in such circumstances wherever I am*
- *The power of individual and collective action and observation led me to look for solutions in places I didn't know were there*
- *This has been a big conversation: sharing stories to create connection, moving from should, to could - to real possibility*
- *This was an exercise in embodied design: I now engage with others with the theory alive in my body*
- *I learned how to occupy an ambiguous space*
- *The CCI is Now – How – WOW – Most Significant Change working with Collaborative Design.*

5. The budget

Commentary on: *The difference between the original approved and the final outcome, particularly in light of the cost to Culture Shift*

The budget suffered due to the lower than expected registrations leading to a small overall loss (8% over gross income). The conference estimates were conservative and based on 20

participants in each (i.e. 40 in total). The actual number of participants was 21 plus panel members and facilitators making the total to 29.

A breakdown of expenses and income are summarized in Appendix 1. The risk was always going to be relatively minor given the user pays nature of the costings. There are many other ways to price such an event, which can be considered for future events – including a fee structure that differs for those being paid for by their institutions and those who are self-funded.

We also recommend that the budget spreadsheet consist of no more than three worksheets: the first as an overview with predicted and actual figures clearly defined; the second being an income breakdown; and the third being expenses breakdown. Calculators for each worksheet are also essential, as well as regular updating and version control; all team members should be involved in these updates.

6. Communication

> Commentary on: *Communication between Culture Shift and ALARA, and within the Organising Committee*

When the contract commenced, communications between the organising committee and CultureShift and ALARA was clear and efficient communication. However as the event grew closer, communications seemed to deteriorate. This occurred at the same time as the event team itself became more coherent and integrated, such that communications internal to the team were effective but communications outside the team was at times compromised.

If a future budget partnership is to be considered, we recommend that from the outset the event manager and the respective accounts personnel (booking manager and treasurer from each organisation) be involved in designing the budget worksheets so that they are living documents through the event planning, development and implementation phases. We provided several budget reports to the committee – both using the ALARA planning excel sheet, which is an excellent tool, and also written progress reports. However, it became clear that these documents were not being tabled at committee meetings and that the committee was not informed about the progress of the project. It is unclear as to why this was the case. The signing of the original MOU was a case in point, where repeated drafts of the document were sent, and resent, with intended recipients sending back old drafts as if revisions had not been received.

Ultimately there was a serious communication problem between the conference organizing group and the ALARA committee even though there was reciprocal membership on several fronts, a key point person identified so all communications went through one person, and representatives from the ALARA committee were on yammer, and included in emails. In future some stream lined communication approach needs to be worked out, tested, and consistently used to avoid these significant breaks in informed decision making.

Reporting and communications between organisations can be time consuming so our assumption is that people in both organisations were concurrently facing time restrictions. Defining clear communication procedures and reporting protocol for both organisations and the event manager of a collaborative event such as this would be beneficial at the outset of the next event.

There was a change in ALARA representation following the 2014 AGM when Ross stepped down from the Committee. As a consequence, John stepped up and became included in key decisions. This change in representation was overlooked by CultureShift at one teleconference involving significant decisions about whether to go ahead, and this was a significant oversight.

In retrospect, if ALARA were to hold a similar event again, the following is suggested:

- The entire organisation should commit wholeheartedly to the event and the partnership. Designing and presenting an unknown design is challenging, confronting and exhilarating, it requires a high level of commitment from everyone. If you really want to do it, do it! If you are unsure then don't!
- Internal communications with ALARA members need to be changed for marketing to be possible.
- Use "try booking" or another stable on-line booking site.
- Initiate event reporting protocol and procedures.
- Propose event team/ALARA MC rep meeting dates involving the whole design team.
- Proactively engage in event marketing with members, journals and organisation networks.
- Proactively engage with the event team and potential delegates about the event message during pre-production phases so that the marketing and message can be adapted and refined accordingly
- Attend the event and ensure it is clear that making a submission is not a requirement for attendance
- Budget for a minimum of 10 hours a week for the event coordinator, and for their presence at the event.
- The value of an Early Bird deadline is questionable – people who come to ALARA events tend to be unable to plan ahead, and can only make their decision to attend as their very different work situations unfold.
- The same is true for a submission deadline – it would have been more beneficial to all involved if submissions could continue to be received up to the time of writing the scenarios.
- Evaluation was provided by Silver Wattle, however a form of evaluation following the event to track impact and outcomes would be useful for participants as well as organisers – this would be less about "success" and more about understanding how the methodology works and proves its value to practitioners and their sponsors.

7. Further comments

Commentary on: *Anything else you found was good / a problem*

The inclusion of Shane Mortimer, Wolgulu Senior Elder throughout the whole development process and the events significantly added to the cultural strength and authenticity of the event.

The simple and effective touch of the conference cloth bags, the sparse yet high quality print materials and sustainably sourced stationary was well received and well used. Giving participants a full memory stick of photos from the event was a nice touch that was truly appreciated by many participants.

The ethos of the ALARA committee who offered ongoing support and courage for the whole conference strategy was warmly received and at times really important to supporting the challenges of the process. It was a great pity that committee members could not attend to enjoy the fruits of their faith.

Our personal thanks also to Robyn who wholeheartedly rose to the challenge of the bookings and waded through the difficulties with grace.

Our thanks also go to Helena who was contracted to work 3 hours a week on the event which was a significant underestimation. Helena brought not only generosity but also her expertise as

an action researcher in her own right, as well as her own networks to save many days including contact Rachel Shields who stepped up to replace Bronwyn at a week's notice before the event took place. We thank Rachel for her courage and her extraordinary presence.

Similarly we thank Ross and Mark Spain, who stepped into Panel member and Co-Facilitator roles respectively when Celia Hodson stepped down.

We thank Jim Tuttle who provided logistical support in exchange for conference registration; and David and Trish at Silver Wattle who provided such a calm and well organized environment. The religious focus of this retreat was felt by some to be a little impositional, (grace at lunch time) and this may need reconsideration if future retreat style locations are used.

All projects are fluid but with collaborative leadership and shared vision across ALARA committee and CultureShift as well as the conference panels, the event proved its worth.

We recommend that ALARA does it again!

Appendix 1: Conference Budget

(Note that this is an indicative account of expenses and income, not an audited record)

Expenses	
Conference Management	$3,750.00
Costs for panel members, facilitators, conference manager	$3,427.77
Honorariums for Panel Members ($500 x 6)	$3,000.00
Venue hire (6 days)	$1,413.53
Welcome to country fee (x2)	$700.00
Conference Stationery	$768.00
Total Expenses	**$13,059.30**
Income	**$12,040.00**