ALARj

Action learning and action research journal

Volume 18 No 2 July 2013

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Editorial:
Action research, action learning and community services
Phil Crane

This edition of ALARj has a focus on the contribution of action learning and action research to the development of community services, particularly non-profit community services. The landscape of community services has been changing rapidly in recent decades, and can be typified by the notion of complexity. Complexity in the nature of issues that services seek to respond to, complexity in the policy environment and systems of support that have tended to silo and compartmentalise problems and people, and complexity in the institutional location non-profit services occupy in 'helping' those who are seen as 'in need' or marginalised.

In addition to being typified by complexity the environment in which community services are located is also highly dynamic, undergoing profound and ongoing change as approaches to understanding and responding to human need increasingly emphasise the individualisation of risk and the demonstration of outcomes, through policies which combine targeting with market principles such as choice, competition and quality. How can long held values of empowerment, care, inclusivity, relationship and benefit to individuals and communities have expression in community services as they grapple with the challenges of being viable and relevant in such a dynamically changing environment?

This edition brings together a range of contributions which speak to these challenges. The thematic through these is that in contexts typified by complexity processes are needed which engage

services and their communities in ongoing dialogue and processes of inquiry about how they can best proceed. Further the character of such processes needs to be purposeful, contextually sensitive, iterative and participatory. Action learning and action research can provide processes with this character.

The first article in this edition examines the challenges facing the Australian not-for-profit disability sector. By David Rosenbaum and colleagues, it is chosen to lead off as it provides a useful overview of some of the profound changes taking place in how community services are funded, the challenges this poses for not-for-profit services, and how a participatory form of action learning can assist services respond. The relevance of this article goes well beyond its particular context.

The article by David Moxley and colleagues outlines how community based participatory action research and development processes can be used to develop prototype innovations, or what are termed small 'start ups'. Given the challenges of resource scarcity faced by many community services and practitioners, how to conceptualise change processes so they can start from modest unfunded beginnings is important and timely. As the song by Kev Carmody says 'from little things big things grow'.

Robert Sommer highlights through a very engaging narrative account the potential for serendipity in participatory action research processes where the skills in data analysis can be limited and the service culture sensitive.

The constructs used to frame people's lives and issues matter. The article by Melissa Walker and colleagues illustrates how a frame of improving wellness rather than a focus on disease underpins the feminist participatory action research undertaken by and with Indigenous Australian women in north Brisbane. This paper builds on the growing recognition of the relevance of yarning as a successful method for undertaking Indigenous research.

Michael Beattie's article explores how as a non-Indigenous community development worker he should undertake research practice in a manner consistent with the values of participatory action research and Indigenist research methodology. He outlines his reflective development of a social framework to guide and explain the methods of interaction he identified as allowing him to practice in a way consistent with Indigenous self-determination.

The relationship between universities and community services is shifting as each looks to the other to assist them with challenges core to their respective missions. Both are interested in research and both generally articulate a mission about social benefit and contribution. The article by O'Connor and colleagues is located at this intersection examining the use of participatory action research as a framework for 'service learning' where university students assist non-profit community services to explore questions those services see as critical. Service learning aims to encourage students to gain a greater understanding of social justice, privilege and disadvantage this being seen as an important aspect of education for practice in the community. For community services, particularly those small and medium sized organisations which do not have their own research units, this means increasingly seeing themselves as active participants in research and inquiry rather than passive recipients of 'best practice'.

Action research and action learning have the demonstrated capacity to engage, activate, explore and transform, both in terms of what happens and our understandings of what happens. The article by Joy Murray and colleagues discusses a situation many in community sector work commonly face - a disconnect between what funders have in mind and how this will be evidenced, and what is meaningful and useful to the people who become involved in such projects within communities. Questions about the nature of community leadership and what constitutes sustainable outcomes are explored through a cybernetic lens.

This edition concludes with a conceptual paper which reflects on a panel discussion at the 2012 ALARA Conference involving a number of contributing authors to the book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World.* Given the themes of complexity and dynamic ongoing change which typify the context within which community services are located, this reflecting on the broader location of action research as a broad strategy for achieving social justice and sustainable development is a fitting conclusion to this edition of the ALAR Journal.

Action learning and action research has the capacity to make a substantial contribution to the central mission of community services: that of improving the situations of people. However for this potential to be realised it is important for collaborative inquiry processes to become embedded in how social issues are understood and responded to, and that mechanisms are developed and sustained for dialogue and inquiry that fit a wide diversity of contexts. Community services and practitioners, as well as policy makers and governments, have important roles to pay in this.

The articles in this edition have been double peer reviewed. Thanks very much to the Editorial Panel for this edition (listed alphabetically) Ross Colliver, Bob Dick, Jo Durham, Deb Duthie, Susan Goff, Judith Kearney, Ron Passfield, Wendy Rowe, Shankar Sankaran, Yoland Wadsworth, and Lesley Wood.

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Action Learning Intervention as a Change Management Strategy in the Disability Services Sector – A Case Study

David Rosenbaum, Elizabeth More and Peter Steane

Abstract

The not-for-profit disability services sector faces many challenges. The shift in funding arrangements from a supply-model, to a demand-model, has triggered the reassessment of organisational activity. This paper analyses these challenges, and seeks to study the application of Action Learning as a management tool for dealing with transformational change in this sector. The Action Learning approach implemented in this case study focused on the unique organisational characteristics with regard culture, structure, and the organisational response to the depth of the challenge. In so doing, the organisation recognised the requirements to respond decisively as a result of the shifting funding paradigm. Evidence was obtained regarding successful intervention outcomes, organisationally and personnel-wise. The former being a wide array of organisational and business initiatives, and the latter through the qualitative assessment of participant feedback. This paper provides insight into the development of an Action Learning intervention that can be applied to organisations in this sector, to facilitate such change challenges.

Keywords: Action Learning, Organisational Change, Not-for-Profits, Disability Services Sector

Introduction

This paper seeks to determine the extent to which Action Learning processes can address the transformational change management challenges associated with organisations within the Australian not-for-profit disability services sector, which have resulted directly from proposed new funding arrangements. The paper identifies a particular Action Learning intervention, developed in the context of a change management strategy, and highlights the key learnings from that intervention. These learnings can then form the foundations for similar interventions within this sector as part of the ongoing organisational changes that will result from this new government policy.

The disability services sector in Australia is currently undergoing fundamental change to its funding arrangements. Historically, funding disability organisations has been based on funds moving from government directly to service providers, whereas, the new arrangements shift the movement of funds directly from the service user who pays the service provider based on a principle of choice. The current supply-model is changing to a demand-model and, as such, represents the biggest change to this sector in over 40 years.

For the first time, customers of these providers will be paying service providers directly, based on approved 'Person Centred Plans' ('PCPs'), as a result of what government regulatory agencies refer to as self-managed models in the community participation, ageing, flexible accommodation, respite, and recreation services programs.

This change in policy will have impacts on service providers in this sector. Financial management skills will be tested, especially within small to medium sized disability service providers. One challenge stems from the need to continuously develop and provide cost-effective, user defined programs that meet the

financial constraints of the PCP for each service user. A deeper understanding of how service programs are costed will challenge the financial skills within this sector. A further challenge relates to cash flow management. Under current conditions, service providers focus more on managing their expenses and less on managing their debtors. In the present environment, cash flow management is largely seen as matching the timing of expenditures with the timing of receipts from government. The changing dynamics associated with the PCP environment, from government to the service user, will have ongoing debtor management and potential cash flow implications for these organisations, requiring a change in both procedures and mindsets within the organisation. Once again, smaller to medium sized service providers will need to consider these issues both strategically and operationally. Additionally, a competitive based business environment will also require the input of marketing and business development type skills, which smaller to medium sized service providers do not necessarily possess.

It is within this context that one mid-tier, not-for-profit, service provider, Nepean Area Disabilities Organisation Inc. ('NADO'), proactively approached this potential paradigm shift to their business operations, and sought a process by which both the challenges and opportunities that PCP presented could be adequately responded to, so as to ensure its long term sustainability in this new environment. In so doing, it sought to incorporate the strengths of its current operations and its people, into the new strategic and operational paradigm. In essence, a solution was sought that could transition the organisation without displacing what was already considered successful, whilst taking full advantage of, as yet, undefined, organisational and market based opportunities which would contribute to the future sustainability of NADO. A trialled development of an Action Learning intervention was considered worthwhile as a mechanism that could bridge the commercial and human aspects of such transformational change within a disability service provider,

where commercial considerations of service delivery very often compete with the emotional elements of that delivery, especially in the minds and actions of its staff.

This paper analyses the NADO experiences, as a case study in addressing transformational change, applying Action Learning as a process, based on its organisational development roots and the link that such an approach may have with the personnel attributes which generally characterises the not-for-profit disabilities services sector.

Action Learning, Transformational Change, and the Not-for-Profit Sector

Action Learning in the context of this research

The humanistic attributes of the Organisational Development ('OD') link to Action Learning, have been identified as potentially the most important for the purposes of changing the cultural attributes of organisations operating within the Australian disabilities services sector, as a direct reflection of the characteristics attributed to staff within this industry. In this context, Action Learning is viewed as a multi-faceted, structured, experiential process that impacts an informed group of individuals in an organisational context, focusing on the proactive elements of the organisation as distinct from the more reactive elements (Zuber-Skerritt 2001; Mumford 1997). This case study provides further evidence to support such characteristics associated with Action Learning as an appropriate approach to respond to these varied challenges.

The process is characterised by an unending cycle of action, reflection and understanding. Such an iterative process formed the cornerstone of the Action Learning approach that was adopted in this case study. Interventions of the type applied here involved key elements associated with planned and deliberate change, supporting free choice of the participants and high degrees of

ownership by the organisation (Cummings & Worley 2009, Randall 2004).

The process, therefore, relies heavily on successful workings of an open systems methodology that underpins the learning that makes Action Learning applicable (Lohman 2002). This is supported by the collaborative approach to problem solving as well as the learning that underpins the successful Action Learning outcome (Mumford 1994). Contextually, participants are the experts and these experts develop the solutions, implement the solutions, monitor the success and learn from the process, enabling the application of similar processes to future organisational and human development issues (Zuber-Skerritt 2002a). The application in this case focused on the existing skills of the participants which were reinforced by the passion and service commitment to their clients. The aim was to develop new skills that could be applied to the challenges of the PCP environment and the resultant impact on service delivery outcomes. This was further supported by the external facilitator's focus on skills transference and expanding organisational capability as a direct outcome, in addition to the resolution of the organisational responses to PCP (Cummings & Worley 2009; Palmer et al. 2006).

For Action Learning to be successful, it must contain a number of functional elements which revolve around the ability and freedom of the group members to define the problem, address the issues in an open, informative and questioning manner, and to implement the identified solutions. Elements of the problem or challenge, the group or set members, the process of insightful questioning and reflective listening, the promise to undertake action, the commitment to learning from those actions, and the objective facilitation of the process, must all be present for an effective Action Learning process to have taken place (Marquardt 2001). A vital component within this process is reflection which enables participants in an Action Learning exercise to effectively sit back and review the events that have preceded them and to assess

these in a manner that would enable them to evaluate progress and to evaluate events (Harrell et al. 2001).

Reflection is considered not merely a process, but a structured activity that requires appropriate time and an appropriate environment. Reflection is fundamental to the success of the process. Critical evaluation is the ability of the Set members to constantly challenge issues and thoughts in a positive and supportive framework rather than a competitive or destructive manner. It is designed to build capability and capacity, not destroy character (Mumford 1993). Such reflection must be supported by the organisation and built into the processes that underscore the Action Learning characteristics that seek to engage participants in both organisational and personal development and change (Passfield 2001), as identified in Figure 2.

Action Learning can be applied to impact bottom line performance, operating efficiencies, and staff and/or management development challenges. An Action Learning intervention within such a context seeks to refine the model by which an organisation absorbs information and data, sorts it, applies it to problems and issues, plans, executes, develops its staff to maximise human potential, and develops a culture for the ongoing open-loop learning that positively impacts longer term organisational sustainability . For this to be successful there must be present two complimentary elements which are fundamental to the success of an Action Learning intervention within organisations. On the one hand, there must be benefits accrued to the organisation. Such intervention implies a need to address either specific issues or be project specific. On the other hand, an organisation, being the sum of its human capital, must ensure appropriate enhancement of such human capital and, therefore, secondary outcomes of an Action Learning intervention must address issues of staff development (Davies 2001). As applied in this case study, both elements were addressed and, organisationally, both were seen as equally important. This prioritised, in the minds of the

participants, that whilst change was necessary, support and executive backing would be provided and in-house resources would be developed as integral to the change outcomes.

This discussion of Action Learning, as a dual focused activity at both the technical outcomes level and the personal development level, affords an organisation, as depicted in this case study, an opportunity to move beyond existing constraints. On the one-hand the challenges of major change that question existing modes of operation, whilst on the other, the demands placed on their human resources to develop and adjust to new and engaging environments, can both be addressed with appropriately constructed and targeted Action Learning interventions.

The OD source of Action Learning reflects the linkage with change management, in terms of the inclusiveness that effective change programs may have as a direct result of linking active participation with change outcomes. This effective change and ownership by organisational players (Levasseur 2001) has been recognised as an important context for the changes being the subject of this research, as well as a necessary inclusion in Lewin's 'unfreezing-movement-refreezing' change model (Lewin 1951), as the requisite element in the institutionalisation process associated with the 'refreezing' stage.

Transformational Change in the context of this research

The speed of change resulting from external environmental factors has greatly accelerated since the early 1980's and has effectively surpassed the expectations of earlier OD researchers (Bartunek et al. 2011). The resulting organisational transformation linked to radical changes that ensue, involves the fundamental shift in existing organisational functions, activities, norms and behaviours (Cummings & Worley 2009; Greenwood & Hinnings 1988), and the consequential resistance factors that follow (Roberts 2006). Such external environmental factors are at play in this case study and, as indicated earlier, are regarded as generational in terms of

both their impact and their consequences. This obvious need to dismantle existing structures and processes has been referenced in much of the existing literature where the replacement of old methods, structures, and processes are achieved with the newer ones, and the essence of change as a movement from one state to another (Biggart 1977; Lewin 1951; Joyce 2000; Roberts 2006). In light of the new funding paradigm outlined in this research context, organisations must be prepared to assess the extent to which existing structures and operations are dismantled to enable newer and more applicable structures and operations to be implemented, to remain functional beyond the initial time periods within which the new funding paradigm is first introduced. Changes to structure, changes to service delivery methods and models, changes to customer service paradigms, as well as changes to staff skills sets, in response to different customer requirements, will result from these funding shifts.

Questions also arise as to the readiness of organisations involved in this sector to accept, and work with, the transformational changes that are now afoot. Such change readiness factors and the linkage with success or relative failure is evidenced in the prevailing literature and has been generally recognised as a key contributing factor to success outcomes (Armenakis & Bedeian 1999; By 2007; Caldwell 2011; Cameron & Green 2009). The Australian not-for-profit disabilities services sector historically works within a restrictive financial framework and, accordingly, has extensive experience in effectively 'cutting-the-cloth' to meet these shifting financial constraints. However, whilst this has always been done within the context of a stable, but limited, financing model, radically changing that financing model will challenge many in this sector over the course of the foreseeable future.

Whilst comparative assessments have traditionally been made within the transformational change literature that seeks to classify and distinguish differing categories or classifications and sub-

classifications of transformational change (Nadler & Tushman 1995; Newman 2000; Flamholz & Randle 1998; Reger et al. 1994), some suggestion exists as to the relationship between transformational-like outcomes stemming from incremental change, in contrast to a single minded adherence to transformational outcomes stemming only from transformational change (Hamel 2001). OD interventions need to remain focussed on ensuring the meeting of outcomes at the organisational and personnel levels so that long-term organisational sustainability is achieved.

Not-for-Profit issues in the context of this research

The not-for-profit sector generally faces a range of unique challenges over and above those faced by the current changes to existing funding models for the disabilities services sector. Such organisations face ongoing sustainability problems which are directly linked to full or partial government funding (Ball 2011). This places them at risk of being responsive to ongoing political bias and the associated challenges of managing the ongoing conflict between issues of mission, and practicalities of operational and organisational sustainability, especially within religious based not-for-profits (Steane 2008; Steane 2001).

The ability to attract, maintain, and develop human resources, places ongoing strains and stresses on the constancy of programme and service delivery for not-for-profits. This issue specifically threatens those not-for-profits operating in the broader human service sectors of disability, mental health, and aged care. Additionally, the use and application of hybrid performance measurement criteria for those not-for-profits operating commercial and quasi commercial activities, in competition with for-profit organisations, test their management capabilities at both executive and board levels (Ball 2011; Lyons 2001).

The demanding business environment that many in this sector have faced over extended periods of time, has jeopardised

ongoing program funding, and placed heavy demands on service delivery, threatening the continuity of segments of their operations (Drucker 1990). This has been further compounded by a unique reliance on a diverse volunteer pool (Lyons 2001) which challenges many in managerial and leadership functions within this sector, and places significant strain on their organisation's abilities to achieve strategic and operational goals, within given timeframes.

In this context, the need to understand and deal with large, varied, and dispersed external and internal stakeholder groups (Myers & Sacks 2001), continues to strain not-for-profit human, financial, and capital resources, placing even further management constraints on these organisations, and potentially focusing attention away from their predominant service, and program delivery objectives. Moreover, these organisations tend to have complex revenue generation models, which reflect the varied sources of funds that need to be managed within a complex and often multi-skilled environment (Steane 2001; Lyons 2001), where their ability to attract the full gamut of skills is already under sharp focus.

In amongst these NFP organisational issues is the multi-dimensional focus of not-for-profit management, which must have more than a unilateral view on purely bottom-line and associated shareholder value outcomes (Marcuello 2001; Bois et al. 2003).

Associated with this broad range of challenges are the cultural attributes of those working within this sector. These include a perceived connection with a broader societal good and the lack of private gain or profit at the organisational levels (Speckbacher 2003; Ball 2011) and their own perceptions of being human change-agents integral to changing the lives of those that rely on their services (Drucker 1990). Integral in this view is recognition of the pivotal role that such human service type organisations are now playing in society as part of an integrated four-pillar

institutional service provision network encompassing government, not-for-profits, business and family networks (van Til 2008). The above framework sets the cultural context within which the not-for-profit disabilities services sector operates and provides insight into the challenges that lay ahead during this current process of the transformational change discussed earlier.

Research Strategy

Case Study approach

This case study reflects ongoing industry and academic concerns regarding the current gap between management research and management practice (Bansal et al. 2012; Siggelkow 2007). It includes a documented trail of activities, results, outcomes, and learnings, supported by a participant questionnaire. The first co-author is a consultant to this sector and engages in a range of Organisation Development type activities, using Action Learning with a number of disability service providers.

The Research Case

As stated in the 2009/2010 Annual Report of NADO, "*Nepean Area Disabilities Organisation Inc. is a not for profit, community based service provider …. The organisation is governed by a voluntary Board and managed through the delegations of the Chief Executive Officer. NADO's Vision is to be an innovative and sustainable organisation, inspiring leadership and positive futures for people with disability in partnership with the community.*"

NADO is one of the largest disability service providers at a local regional level, with origins as a local family support group some thirty years ago. The organisation provides a broad range of services and, whilst these are numerous, they tend to fall into the following categories:

Day programs

Community based day programs

Flexible respite services

Recreation programs, and

After school and vacation care programs

NADO employs 129 staff of whom 18 are permanent full-time, 42 are permanent part-time, and 69 are casual. The Board is constituted by up to 7 voluntary members whilst the executive and management team comprise a CEO and 5 senior managers. These managers are responsible for either a range of centralised corporate activities, including Administration and Quality Improvement, or regional service delivery activities reflecting the diverse geographic locations across the western regions of Sydney. Organisationally, NADO is structured with service centres across the outer western region, offering a range of services to physically and intellectually disabled people.

The NADO organisational structure is depicted in Figure 1 below.
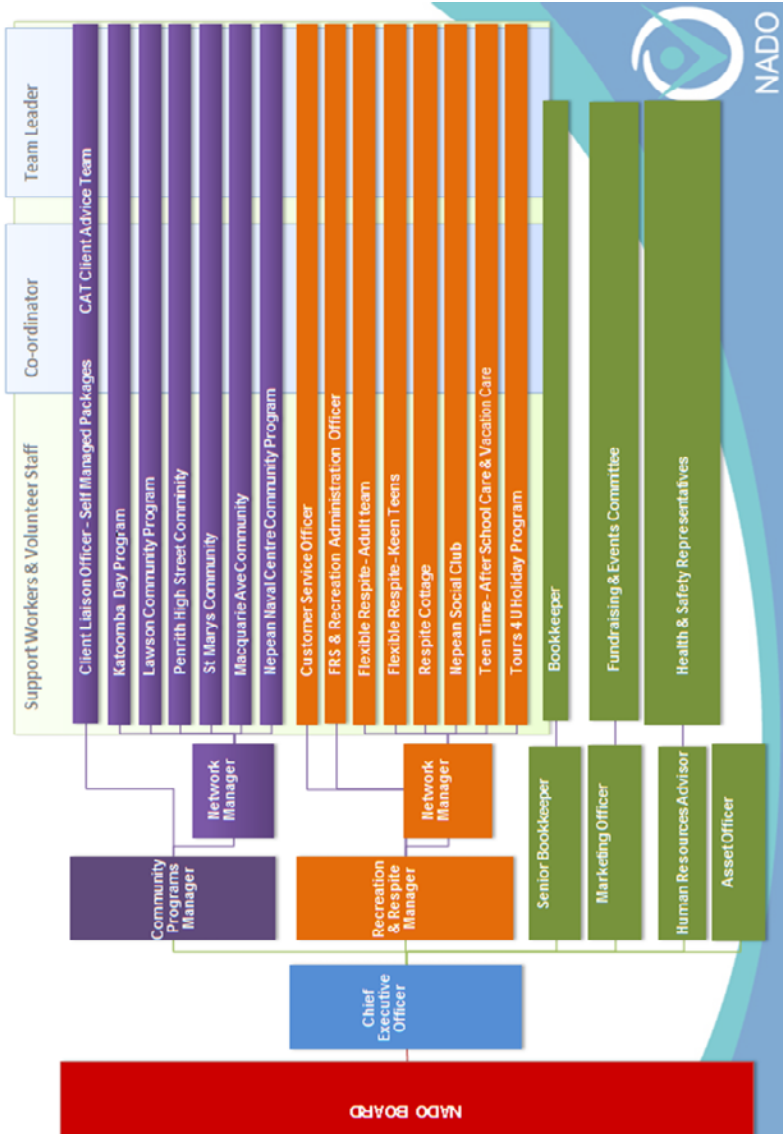
Figure 1 – NADO Organisation Structure

As depicted in the above structure, NADO recently restructured itself organisationally to focus all programs and service delivery options along two broad service provision groupings, namely Community Programs and Recreation & Respite Services. Such a structure provides the flexibility needed to implement PCP across the organisation to the level required by the regulatory agencies.

The introduction of PCP potentially shifts the medium to long term focus of the organisation away from physical service silos and refocuses these to demand-driven resource-orientated activities where service location becomes secondary to the needs and demands of the client.

Discussion

Foundations for the Action Learning Program

In response to NADO's requirements, two Action Learning sets were created simultaneously. Set 'A' focused their attention on Community-Based Day Programs ('CBDP'), whilst Set 'B' focused on Flexible Respite Services ('FRS'). For each, an initial challenge was determined for each Set to work their way through during the course of the Action Learning process. The CBDP Set was presented with the challenge of setting a broad range of service delivery goals that were not to be restricted by prevailing resources, including multi-site operations and availability. The FRS Set was presented with the challenge of addressing the structural and service delivery challenges associated with broader organisational capacity, staff rosters, resource flexibility, and staffing criteria.

These challenges were determined by the CEO in conjunction with the Action Learning Set Leaders to ensure that they provided enough scope for an Action Learning intervention. The task of these leaders was three-fold: to define the focus of each Set's Action Learning programs, to ensuring the full range of Set logistics was addressed so resources and activities were

coordinated, and finally, to ensure all Set members avail themselves of the opportunity to contribute in a democratic and supportive framework. In this manner, the leaders became sensitive to the needs and characteristics of each member, as did the members themselves with regards their interactions with each other. This appeared to optimise the Set processes and deliberations, as members began to focus not just on the outcomes that they were trying to achieve, but equally as important, the process by which they would achieve these outcomes and outputs, in order that replicability across the organisation could also be achieved for potential future Action Learning programs. In essence, this developed the 'infrastructure' foundations for creating an Action Learning framework that the organisation could use as a method of dealing with future organisational change initiatives. This fulfilled the capacity building objectives of both the consulting exercise and the OD roots of Action learning.

The Set members were drawn from within the service provision ranks, but were not necessarily organisational team leaders or coordinators within existing programs. This ensured that the process itself focused on inclusiveness attributes of Action Learning which underpinned the general acceptance level of the process itself. It was the responsibility of each of the Set Leaders to detail these challenges in the context of the broader parameters indicated by the CEO. In turn, the CEO, in conjunction with her internal human resource advisor, identified the appropriate staff from within the organisation for inclusion as Set members. The characteristics noted for inclusion included detailed knowledge of the service provision areas, ability to function as a team member, acknowledgement of the challenges associated with full implementation of PCP, and a desire to create the 'solution' by being part of the process.

Design of Action Learning Program

A three step process was deployed to fulfil the expectations of the organisation. In the first instance, Action Learning diaries[1] were developed to foster the application of critical reflection for all Set members. This reflection process reinforced both the technical, solutions-driven agenda, as well as the group dynamic aspects of human behaviour. In this manner the focus became progress towards organisational problem solving, people development in the company of their peers, and to encourage the contextual learning that the process fosters between people within an organisational setting (Revans 2011; Coghlan & Rigg 2012).

In the second instance, to support this learning and reflection process, the researcher arranged for members of each Set to undertake a self-evaluation of their learning styles based on the Honey & Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire (Kolb et al 1973; Honey & Mumford 1982), aimed at supporting personal awareness of Set members' own learning styles, and fostering an understanding of the characteristics of other learning styles that may be prevalent within the Set. The outcome of each learning style assessment was made known to the facilitator but was initially kept confidential as between the Set members, who were given the option to divulge their learning style to each other if they so wished, although they were not compelled to do so. In reality, all members were more than keen to discuss their individual styles, and this level of openness appeared to reinforce the workings of the group and established a positive group dynamics moving forward. Such understanding of the varied characteristics and the flexibility that would enable individuals within the Sets to challenge their own performance (Easterby-Smith 1997), during the differing stages of the Set meetings, fostered the learning component at the individual level.

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[1]   These diaries constituted part of the research data

Finally, the Action Learning processes were designed to enable the groups to achieve the organisational outcomes that were being sought. The Set meetings and overall process followed the pattern as indicated in Figure 2.

In this manner, the Action Learning intervention entailed an iterative process of presentation, interviews, questioning, learning and reapplication, to garner views for analysis, and leading to the challenge definition and scope determination is depicted in Figure 3, as 'Disorderly Conception to the Orderly End Process', where the conversation commenced at the big picture level, continued through the interpretative bubbles in subsequent meetings, and reached the end solutions via ongoing discussion, planning, action, reflection and discussion, where the targeted outcome was the result of an ongoing iterative process.

Ongoing set meetings would follow the general path outlined in Figure 4 where meetings would commence with an assessment of previously planned and executed actions, deriving learnings from those actions, incorporating these learnings into new-form discussions, leading to an agreement as to new and focused actions to be undertaken subsequent to the meeting and before the next scheduled meeting. Such agreed actions would result directly from this assessment and discussion process.

Logistically, each Set meeting was undertaken within a two hour time period. This was considered necessary given the challenging environment of the organisation vis-à-vis its clientele and the inability to effectively backfill the positions occupied by Set members during the course of proceedings. Meetings were conducted on a three weekly cycle which provided ample opportunity for reflection, information gathering, and, where necessary, trialling actions agreed upon at previous meetings.
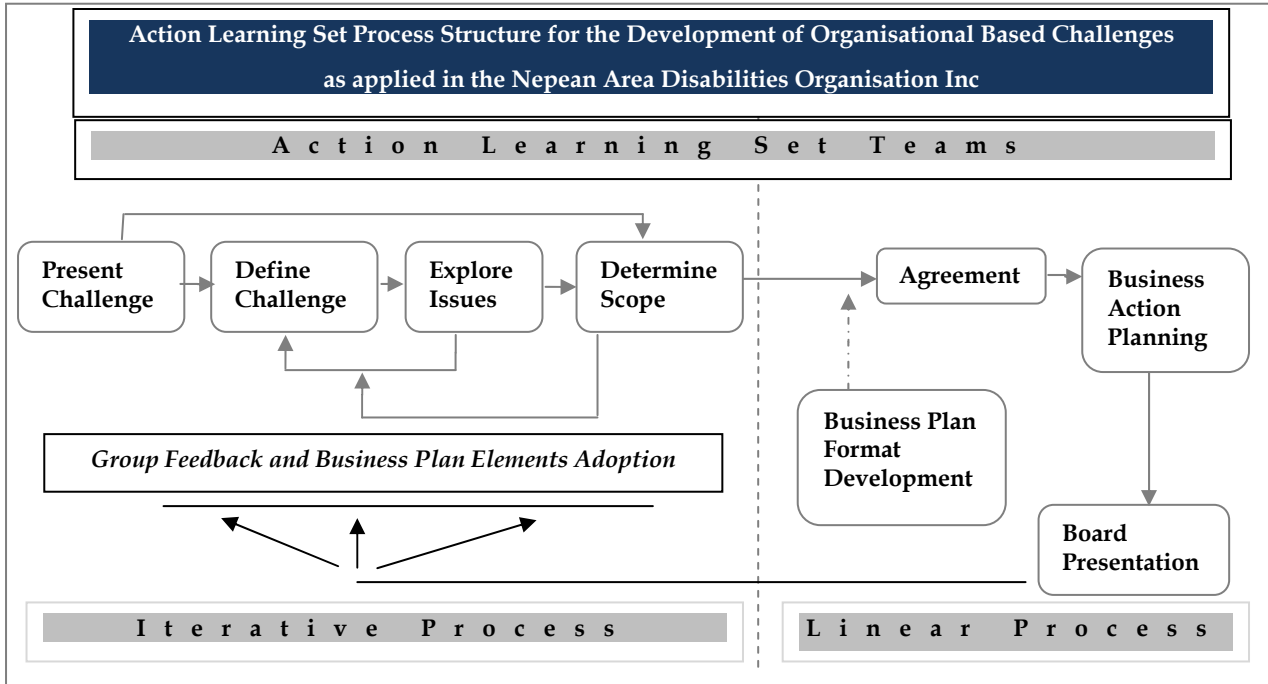
Figure 2 – The Action Learning Meeting and Process Framework
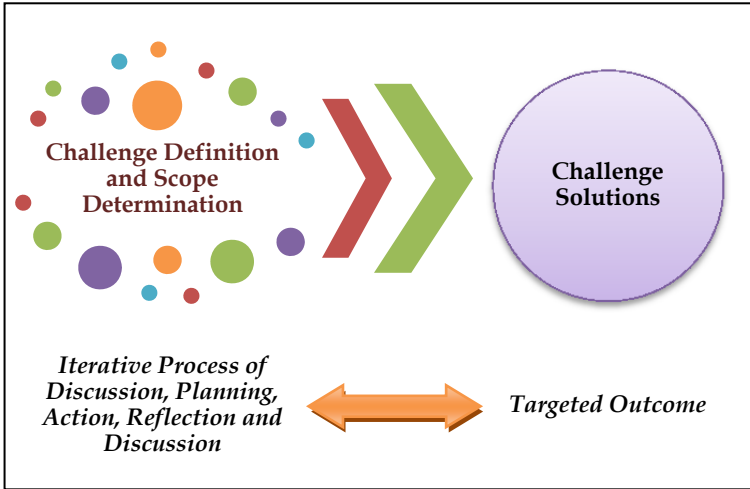
Figure 3 – The 'Disorderly Conception to the Orderly End Process'
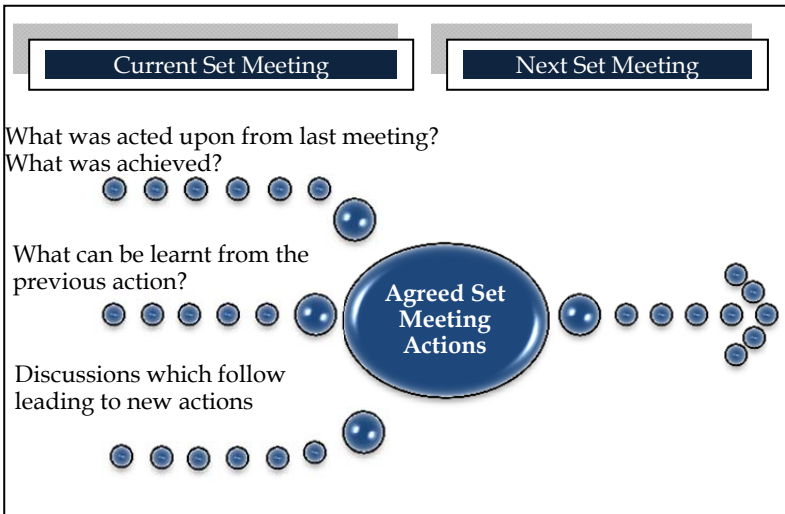
Figure 4 – Meeting-to-Meeting Processes

Agreement was reached with executive management that the final 'output' of the Action Learning teams would be the development of a 'Business Plan' that would detail those solutions developed and identified by the Sets in direct response to the challenges originally brought to them, and refined during the course of the meetings. These business plans would be submitted to the CEO for information only and then presented to the board of NADO as part of formal presentations by the Action Learning teams for review and consideration.

Outcomes of the Action Learning Program and Key Learnings for Application in this Sector

From an operational perspective, the majority of recommendations contained in the business plans have been accepted by the Board of NADO and are at various stages of implementation. The management team was restructured to bring greater operational support to line management and included the restructuring of a broad range of individual roles in areas such as the senior management, client liaison and customer service. Client-focused resources are being developed both on-line as well as in shop-front mode to further support clients and their carers to better avail themselves of PCP opportunities. Operational systems are being developed and enhanced in areas of client management and finance whilst new internal staff training and development needs have now been identified. Finally, concepts of service delivery have been changed to focus on across-the-spectrum programs rather than the current focus on geographic location. In this manner, NADO has started the journey of matching service capability with service demand.

In terms of personnel development, evidence can be drawn from the Set Member participant questionnaire which was provided to participants at the conclusion of the process. Highlights of the results of this questionnaire appear as follows:

45% of respondents suggested that without the Action Learning process in place, the organisation would not have necessarily addressed all required process changes in the normal course of their usual strategic planning processes and **89%** felt that the Action Learning program accelerated the organisational outcomes for PCP implementation.

67% of respondents suggested that the organisation did operate within operational silos that were indicative of the structure of service provision within this sector.

89% of respondents had never been exposed to Action Learning prior to this exercise.

78% of respondents were of the opinion that prior to this Action Learning exercise, staff were rarely included in organisational decision making processes.

78% of respondents felt that following their Action Learning experiences, their contribution was beneficial to the organisation and **89%** felt that their involvement was personally rewarding. Additionally, **55%** of respondents felt their contribution levels actually increased during the process.

89% of respondents felt more empowered as a result of the exercise whilst **77%** felt more confident in their ability to contribute to the development of the organisation.

89% felt that the organisation's attractiveness as a place of employment was improved as a result of applying Action Learning as a method of addressing a wide range of organisational issues, whilst **89%** also suggested that Action Learning could improve strategy implementation at NADO.

The application of an Action Learning intervention within this sector identified a number of learnings that could be considered

by those seeking to apply this approach. These are considered relevant when determining the extent to which such an intervention can be undertaken in the context of any change initiative in similar organisational and environmental contexts.

From an organisational perspective, active early engagement with staff is considered fundamental to the success or otherwise of the program. A wide cross-section of staff was involved prior to the development of the interventions. In this manner, the organisation was fully aware of what was being trialled.

Buy-in by the Board was also seen as important as it sent a message to all in the organisation that there was recognition of a pending organisational challenge associated with a range of PCP aspects, and that appropriate solutions were being sought which would be founded on the skills and expertise that already existed within the organisation. This highlighted the sense of inclusivity felt by staff across the organisation, an important ingredient to its success

The sponsorship and enthusiastic support of the CEO underpinned its success, and without it, the intervention would not have been possible. Whilst this support ensured carriage of the intervention, the time challenges associated with those working in the sector, meant that Set Meetings needed to be flexible, as did the follow-up exercises that formed the basis of both Action and Learning. Such flexibility challenged the process of the Set Meetings and meant that as facilitator, rigid adherence to originally designed processes could not be achieved.

The inclusion of a formal business plan as an expected outcome of the intervention ensured a closed loop in the process whereby Learning resulted in Action. From the consultant's perspective, this drove a deeper link between Action Learning as a process, and identified outcomes as a result of the consultancy exercise

(Kozubska & MacKenzie, 2012). This also reinforced the link between staff, the CEO and the Board as a value-added exercise.

From a personnel development perspective, equal focus needs to be given to the skills development of individual set members. This differentiates brainstorming sessions from Action Learning Sets, the former as one-dimensional in nature where the full focus is on the solution whilst the latter is more two-dimensional as it incorporates the involvement and development of individuals within the Set.

The personnel development aspect is further enhanced by ensuring the Set members are the ones that develop the Business Plan and deliver it to the Board as part of a formal close-off of the Action Learning exercise. This last process provides good feedback to the Set members as they take pride in their achievements and are then able to effectively become a visible part of the solution.

Finally, the provision of, and encouragement of use, of Action Learning Diaries, reinforced the importance and relevance of reflection during the exercise. Its use by Set members ensured that Set discussions and questioning was based on deep thought and this enhanced both the process as well as the quality of the outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper assessed the extent to which an Action Learning intervention could be applied in addressing transformational change management challenges within the disability services sector, resulting from a range of external environmental issues. It further tested the extent to which existing theory of Action Learning could be applied within a not-for-profit context. In response, the case study identified an Action Learning model that was developed to fully address the duality of Action Learning

objectives. These were the development of organisational solutions to the specific challenge, and the personnel development solutions that evolved from the overall process, and specifically from the learning associated with iterative processes of Action – Learning – Action – Learning and so forth.

There is some commonality regarding many organisational issues that challenge the management of change in the not-for-profit sector and the for-profit commercial sector. These are evidenced through issues of complacency, politics, shared vision, resistance, processes, and institutionalisation of outcomes. Additionally a contextual formatting of change (Pettigrew et.al. 2001), supports what is generally known about the cultural characteristics that prevail within the broader not-for-profit sector, namely, the participative, bottom-up, shared-leadership (Crutchfield & Grant 2008) styles that tend to predominate, where the soft skills associated with the current PCP challenges are reflected at both the management and the customer interface levels. This paper suggests that addressing change in such not-for-profit environments, using participative approaches such as Action Learning, as distinct to structural, top-down interventions, may prove more sustainable, especially when faced with the transformational changes that are at the heart of this case study.

The broad structure of Action Learning, which has been identified in the prevailing literature, underpinned the specific model created in this case study. It sought to maximise the potential of its humanistic origins with those characteristics that appear to exist in the broader not-for-profit sector and more specifically in the disabilities services sector. The key elements of the process recognised the importance of problem definition, a commitment to openness, insightful questioning, a call to action, and a focus on learning from action. The approach reinforced both the technical outcome and the personal development outcome which, when combined, provided the organisation the ability to move forward, and an opportunity to do so beyond any existing constraints. The

evidence from this case study, as provided in the action plans and the outcomes of the Set Member Participant Questionnaire, reinforces this need to account for the duality of the Action Learning structure, namely the concurrent focus on problem solving and individual development.

The external environmental factors brought about by changes in the regulatory framework of the disability services sector, provided the opportunity and possibly the need, to seek new approaches to deal with the transformational changes that ensued. In many ways, these changes were considered radical as they involved the shifting of functions, activities, norms and behaviours. As discussed earlier, such changes could result in broad consequential resistance. The successful development and implementation of the Action Learning process appears to have broadly neutralised such resistance, whilst developing the platform to appropriately address such transformational change in an inclusive and participatory framework.

Successfully addressing such resistance enabled NADO to develop and implement a range of solutions which were identified by the Action Learning teams, and discussed broadly in this paper. Additionally, the qualitative feedback from team members further reinforced what is known with regards this sector in terms of the types of interventions that may prove successful when dealing with transformational change. The sector-specific cultural attributes may default to a more participative style of change, of which Action Learning is a clear example.

Replication of this solution, across other disability service providers, should be investigated. Additional considerations associated with organisation size, complexity of existing service delivery models, organisational history with regard change and its management, and the state of market competition, are all factors that would need to be considered in the design and implementation of similar Action Learning initiatives.

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Acknowledgements

course of the development of this paper, as well as the involvement of the staff associated with the case study.

Their knowledge of their industry, and their passion with which they apply their extensive skills to people with a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, is awe-inspiring to witness, and I have been fortunate enough to witness this first-hand and thank them for this opportunity.

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Action Research and Development for Intrinsic Innovation in Social Service Administration: Prototyping and Proof of Concept in Small Scale Start-Ups

David P. Moxley, Zermarie Deacon and Valerie R. Thompson

Abstract

In considering the significance of the small-scale start-up in social service agencies and community development, the authors address how community-based participatory action research can serve as an innovation strategy in social service administration. The authors link prototyping to action research, social research and development, and evaluation. They then consider how multiple forms of evaluation as action learning can facilitate the creation and implementation of distinctive small scale start-ups, the appraisal of proof of concept, and the realization of the aims of local and intentional community development through processes of collaborative intrinsic innovation useful to address local social issues.

Keywords: Action Research, Prototyping, Proof of Concept, Program Development, Evaluation

In both social service administration and community development innovative small-scale forms of helping and support serve as important action for those participants seeking to expand

opportunities for people and communities experiencing the negative consequences of serious social issues. Here the authors are not referring to small programs per se--those relatively small grassroots entities which often times emerge from social action. Rather by start-ups, the authors refer to those early prototypes innovators develop before they make subsequent critical decisions about expanding such well-focused entities into larger scale efforts, typically in the form of more established local organizations.

A prototype is "an early version of a system that exhibits the essential features of the later operational system" (Alavi, 1984; Sprague & Carlson, 1982), and is often times undertaken rapidly for the purposes of innovation (Zelkowitz, 1982), and to test a concept so as to judge its long term promise (Harvard Business School Press, 1999). Protyping may offer advantages to a community that is searching for a promising way to address an issue the community faces, when it has limited resources to bring to bear on an issue and, therefore, must make tough choices about how best to address the challenges it faces, and experiment with various options so as to learn directly from experience. A prototype reflects a tentative choice, and its development does not require a firm early decision about staying with a particular promising solution. That prototypes reflect promising avenues of learning amplifies the possibility of failure to realize the benefits a community seeks to bring about. Prototyping may involve a relatively low risk investment for a community that is not well endowed with the kind of resources a commitment to organizational development requires. And, the prototype itself allows a community to prepare its case for resource investment by others based on empirical engagement of the identified social issue through action.

In this paper the authors consider the relationship between action research and development, innovation, and evaluation within the context of intentional community change or development in

which prototyping of a local innovation is a principal objective. They label this approach participatory action research and development given the value social administration or community development practice places on diverse forms of participation in communities seeking to control their infrastructure and capacity building.

The Idea of Prototyping

From the authors' experience, prototypes can emerge from a process of community-based action research in which activists engage in social action typically embedded in the context of social movements. Community-based participatory action research and development is a process of innovation undertaken by its participants and members of interested community groups in stage-oriented, systematic ways although those stages and their procedures may be unrecognizable to more casual observers. The way the authors approach prototyping is somewhat different than a traditional action learning and action research approach since it blends problem analysis, situational analysis, design, and testing of action as one process of engagement in a given community. The blending aims to produce and honor local knowledge to fulfill the values a given set of community actors are seeking to bring about imbuing action research with both design and evaluative objectives. The authors treat prototyping as a form of "learning through action," which recognizes that knowledge for social problem solving emerges from action people take to formulate a prototype and try it out in action. Prototyping therefore constitutes a form of collective or social learning that can link to further action.

Practitioners of action research within the human services, and within evaluation, may use a host of words and phrases to describe what they are doing: model formulation or development, intervention design (Thomas & Rothman, 1994), design and development (Thomas, 1984), or program development (Calley,

2010) are some of those process-oriented concepts. For those participants who undertake evaluation within an action research and development framework there are abundant ways to capture this kind of work involving context evaluation (Stufflebeam, Madaus, & Kellaghan, 2000), developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010; Timmreck, 2002), and differential evaluation, all of which have something substantive to do with a given stage of intentional development innovation moves through as it evolves organizationally within a specific community context.

The organizational maturation process, a product of long haul action research, and action learning in social service, may start with the small scale start-up, or the prototype, and the resulting model in organizational form can emerge as a successful object within a given policy or community context, or it may fall to the wayside, a product of intentional elimination in which experience shows early on that such an avenue of innovation is unproductive, is not ready to achieve success in a given environment, or fails to demonstrate merit in its early period of gestation.

The Distinctive Features of Small Scale Startups

While the authors underscore the importance of the unique community context in which the startup is rooted, they also appreciate that startups--as an important step in the process of innovation--possess their own distinctiveness, which underscores their relevance as a tool for intentional community change. For the authors seven factors are salient in identifying the relevance of prototypic startups in social service work undertaken in local communities:

1. The emergent social issues communities experience call for innovation, particularly local innovation, in helping arrangements and social action.

2.   The extant knowledge base stipulating or otherwise
      suggesting a sound response may be weak or non-existent
      in the substantive area or domain of action although there
      may be ample analogues with which practitioners and
      community members can work in inspiring and informing a
      local design. The identification of analogues informing a
      design may be one of the most useful action steps the
      intentional change process can incorporate.

3.   Available theory guiding the fabrication of the prototype
      may be neither appropriate nor useful, and it is up to
      practitioners and participants to formulate or otherwise
      generate a theory to support the specific design of the
      prototype.

4.   The need for action may be immediate and address issues
      and objectives the host community may find quite
      challenging thereby making rapid prototyping and the
      formation of a small scale start up important and immediate
      steps in the process of social innovation. Because of such
      circumstances, design and implementation must go hand-
      in-hand making the development process nonlinear and
      cyclical (Patton, 2010; Capra, 2002).

5.   Consistent with the nonlinear and cyclical approach to
      innovation, the small scale start-up may be undertaken
      through social or organizational learning in which the
      practice knowledge (both tacit and explicit) from the start-
      up informs larger scale organizational development or
      diffusion efforts (Nonaka, & Takeuchi, 1995).

6.   Given resource limitations, particularly within distressed or
      marginalized communities, the small scale start up serves
      as a potential proof of concept to garner additional
      resources or investments, or to determine whether further
      investment is even advisable. Thus, there is a relationship

between the startup and the resource development strategy the host entity can undertake to further support subsequent investment in the prototype.

7. The startup can demand innovations in the host organization and community. The prototype may require specific supports or pose specific challenges to the host, whether organization, community or system, and, in turn, the host may make demands that alter the properties of the prototype. The small scale start up may be a subsequent product of this push and pull that shapes both object and its host.

The Community-Based Participatory Action Research and Development Process Concept Formation, Civic Engagement, and Relationship Formation

For those administrators or practitioners interested in developing prototypes what is the systematic process they could undertake in practice? The early stages of what the authors refer to as prototyping involves appreciation—it begins with an understanding of issue, the need forming within the domain of action, and the assets operating within the community context to address the issue and fulfill need--and then it moves on to a fuller understanding of community capacity (perhaps in the form of appreciating other interventions and their auspices including informal or voluntary associations, programs, organizations, and institutions, for example (Cooperrider, & Whitney, 2005). In situations in which need is apparent but goes unfulfilled, or in those situations, in which need is poorly addressed within a given context, practitioners may come to identify a promising concept for action.

For those who embrace an action research perspective, or some variant of this perspective (such as participatory forms), concept formation is emergent—it often follows from a relatively long

period of observation and/or direct experience in which social research and development participants engage in sustained involvement with a potential context that results in a full appreciation of the assets operating within the situation, insight into opportunities facilitating change, and the identification of challenges a community faces (Horvath, 2000). Concept formation may be grounded in rigorous systematic analysis, or it may emerge serendipitously as an epiphany given the theoretical and value commitments of those stakeholders involved in reflective activities they undertake in group or collaborative settings (Johnson, 2010).

Evolving from sustained involvement in a given community with rich dialogue with other observers or participants, research and development participants can engage in an intuitive process of creativity that in turn can induce innovative ideas (Johnson, 2010). The ideas themselves may influence the formation of an image, a conceptual map, a heuristic and/or some kind of image all of which are likely preliminary—that is; they are not definitive or controlling. Their utility is found in instigating the initial typically poorly formed prototype that can soon take shape in a more salient and well defined image of action.

Civic engagement may prove to be fundamental within the early stages of prototyping. Given the social and interactive requirements of change, the principal stakeholders who initiate the prototyping project reach out to others, perhaps across institutional boundaries. University personnel may initiate this process engaging members of a designated community in defining the purpose and ends of prototyping, which often times may come in the form of narrative, a storied perspective on the nature of the emerging conceptual prototype (Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). Alternatively, community members may reach out to university or academic personnel seeking their involvement and technical assistance.

For multiple groups involved in prototyping their motivation is important early in the lifespan of the project. Academic personnel may define the prototype in what Stake (1995) identifies as an instrumental mode looking to the project to address aspects of a social problem or issue as a model nationally or within the domain in which researchers seek to increase knowledge. Community participants, on the other hand, may see the prototype in intrinsic terms—it must address those social issues a particular community experiences first hand and imbues with priority. Resolving the strain forming between instrumental aims one group brings to the project and the intrinsic objectives another local group seeks to fulfill is a critical action best achieved early on in the prototyping project. The tension-- or what Moore (2002) calls a chasm separating groups into distinct interests--amplifies the importance of forming trust, defining direction, and bringing about a multi-stakeholder alliance as early as possible even though this kind of conflict can spur innovation within an organizational field in which some stakeholders may challenge existing well established instrumental or intrinsic templates (Harford, 2011).

Linking successfully what appear at first glance to be disparate groups or stakeholders into a unified design effort may be one of the more important actions within the early period of community-based action research and development. Those groups will likely move collaboratively to connect context and prototype and, as a result, they invest considerable effort in discovering or otherwise illuminating the connection between unfulfilled need and promising response. Here there may be considerable refinement of the early prototype ensuring (for the practitioner at least) that there is a relevant fit between local context and action—both its process and ends.

Engagement within social service administration can stand as an expression of an agency's social responsibility and organizational citizenship. Exercise of such roles means the agency cares about its

community, and is willing to engage others in the process of community development in which relationship formation across diverse stakeholder groups integrates collective effort to improve quality of life. In this manner, through administrative or institutional leadership an agency can build those partnerships so essential to the formulation of creative and meaningful responses to local issues.

Experiential Engagement in Community Action Settings

Investment in collaborative concept formation is invaluable principally because it emerges out of the participants' involvement within local context and thus is likely a product of experiential engagement. The participants' appreciation of the context stirs reflection on appropriate, useful or meaningful responses that, in turn, stimulate thinking about action resulting in the development of the prototype. So the early prototype is informed by the engagement of the participants in a crucible of action—in an actual context for which the prototype (or model, that is) will be situated making the intrinsic approach to action research and development a relevant one for local communities and the organizations serving them.

Participants likely work in teams with community members as fully enfranchised actors in the change process. Those teams may be situated in host organizations well established in the local community, or they may work under the auspices of larger institutions, such as a faith-based entity, church, synagogue, or mosque. Or, better yet, teams can emerge horizontally when they recruit members across the community from multiple and diverse entities locating themselves in neutral ground within a community (Straus, 2002). For a given community, the auspices of the initiator may be important for engagement of community groups in the process of illuminating or refining the prototype, which will likely emerge as an important activity if participation is

an important project aim. Here the participants' alignment with a well trusted auspice may stand as yet another success factor.

Participants in the action research and development process can benefit from the interpersonal and group linkages and relationships they form within community contexts pulling from them diverse forms of knowledge useful in intrinsic prototyping (Ames, 2001). This suggests that early formation of a prototype may be a product of networked knowledge making the contributions of community groups important if not critical to the design and development of a local prototype. Networked knowledge means that content does not come from one dominant source. It is likely formed through broad based input by diverse groups the members of which may have different perspectives on the issue that inform the purpose and subsequent design of the prototype. Thus, the potential knowledge base of prototyping may be diverse involving explicit, tacit, experiential, and official knowledge.

Within collaborative community building a prototyping project ensures the involvement of those groups whose members are marginalized within their communities, so a process of involving them in making their perspectives explicit becomes an important aspect of both civic engagement and the participatory framework inherent in most community-based prototyping efforts.

Rapid or time-limited work on the part of multiple constituencies using various team-based or stakeholder-based avenues of innovation will likely serve as important tools. Community-based methods of design may prove useful like World Cafés (Brown, Issacs, & World Café Community, 2005), search conferences (Emery & Devane, 2000; Rehm, Cebula, Large, & Ryan, 2002), and design charrettes (Condon, 2008). Those methods help participants make their knowledge explicit to others and to bring this knowledge into the network of content prototyping requires (Race, & Torma, 1998). This type of knowledge formation

implicates the important functions of retreats as temporary environments in which groups interact to make knowledge explicit so visionary planning can occur (Moxley, 2003), and alternative designs can emerge (Moxley, 2011) . Used well those methods potentially strengthen the participatory qualities of community-based prototyping and, as a result, strengthen intergroup relationships.

Shaping the Initial Prototype through Participation

The production of a working prototype no matter how ill-defined is an early product of action research and development. It requires considerable investment of creative effort, reflection, and design work and activity, likely a product of concerted effort by a leading change team complemented by the involvement of various or even diverse groups concerned about how the prototype can elevate the quality of environment or quality of life of the community in which the prototype is rooted. Here again participatory forms of action are inherently important to the realization of a good design of an early prototype since no one group likely possesses all of the requisite knowledge to produce an adequate design.

Control over the prototype raises fundamental questions about power and its exercise within a given community. In those situations in which the prototype is part of a larger community development project or organizational effort the act of creating a prototype can serve empowerment aims as those groups and members who otherwise do not have much influence over the policy direction of a given community can nonetheless make meaningful and critical contributions within those forums a project offers.

Not only may the process of prototyping be inherently participatory but it can involve the control of the process by those individuals who are meant to be its beneficiaries. Models of community change grander than the action research and

development approach—such as participatory governance--can forge a new context in which creative engagement of groups with one another can harness creative energy. The process of governing an actual participatory prototyping project may help a community achieve considerable relevance and ancillary benefits may also come about such as motivation and empowerment of participants as well as community self-efficacy and community control.

The governance of the prototyping project can morph into important features or dimensions of the prototype including policy formation, resource development, strategic planning, organizational development, and sustainability efforts. The entire process may emulate what French community organizers refer to as animation (Blondan, 1971). Groups within a community collaborate to produce and govern something of mutual benefit thereby offsetting what Ostrom (1990) identifies as the "tragedy of the commons," a situation in which groups compete over resources of a jointly-owned asset resulting in diminished resources for all.

The Prototype's Embodiment of Innovative Perspectives

Within the action research and development model the state of the art review, systematic examination of extant models, the review of innovative or emerging practices, and the identification of best practices can serve as meaningful steps in designing the early prototype (Manela & Moxley, 2002). The refinement process likely involves structuring of the prototype. Participants may look to local experts, domain-based experts, existing models or analogues, and relevant literature for inspiration, innovation, information and further ideas. Or, they may generate their own intrinsic ideas formed through direct experience of the issues a community faces. However, the inclusion of those individuals or groups and their knowledge, which the process may otherwise omit in the structuring of the prototype, is likely one of the most important

activities inherent in community-based participatory action research and development.

The refinement of the prototype can come about visually as an evolving logic model, conceptual schematic, visual map, or some other kind of visual presentation that portrays the practical elements of the prototype in graphic form. What form will the prototype take, what is its structure, and how will the host come to implement it in action? Responding effectively to those questions, and expanding the content base of the prototype, facilitates its subsequent translation into an operational entity.

Such operational translation involves what organizational learning or systems theorists refer to as presencing (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2008). Participants translate the prototype from its early design or image into the present or "the now" as an explicit promising model of action with considerable potential and possibility for bringing about within a particular context those desirable changes that can improve community life in a material way (Scharmer, 2009).

The Prototype as Conceptual Product

A concept that takes specific shape within a given context is one version of the prototype, a prelude to an object attaining the actual operational reality groups envision early on in the action research and development process. Its promise and its potential are uncertain early on which imbues initial (and subsequent) proof of concept work with considerable importance. Numerous questions can dominate the action research and development agenda here, but the authors highlight five given the immediacy of those questions and corresponding answers to effective prototyping:

- Is there early evidence for acceptability?

- Do community groups find a good and acceptable match between the context in which they live and the potential way the prototype will add to their quality of life?
- Does the early version of the prototype possess a sound logic suggesting a capacity to make a positive difference in the very real context of challenges in which a community must exist?
- Do early pilots suggest the potential for promising outcomes or effects, ones intended to make a beneficial and demonstrable difference in the community context for which the prototype is designed?
- Do relevant hypotheses emerge informed by trial use to illuminate either positive or negative unintended consequences?
- Do stakeholders, particularly those whose status is marginalized, find the prototype a valuable addition to the community? Is support visible early on indicating that groups will nurture the prototype over the long haul?

The Emergence of the Prototype as Small Scale Start-Up

The launch of the prototype is what the authors refer to as the small scale start-up. The prototype is now a material entity, although it may still remain somewhat crude or ill defined. But the prototype possesses substance and it is ready for implementation albeit in a preliminary way for engaging in proof of concept, further understanding of how it behaves in action, and further development of its value to the community. For a community or organization the small-scale prototype can hold considerable promise, particularly for learning about how the prototype adds value to the context in which it is embedded.

The process moves from one of presencing the prototype within a given context to one of realization implicating the importance of organizational learning (Scharmer, 2009). Realization means that the prototype is operational. The community possesses a small scale test or trial use of the values the prototype embodies in relationship to the aims of improving community quality of life. Through the operationalization of those values a set of metrics can come about useful in assessing or otherwise judging the merits of the prototype.

The small scale start up is not yet ready to be scaled up into a larger effort. It is, however, a real, present, functional entity and for participants and members of collaborative groups the process that creates it and the resulting product, are certainly open to intentional evaluation. Indeed, the realization of a functional object means that formal testing can ensue. A principal question is important here: Does the prototype measure up to its intentional aims typically involving relevance, acceptability, feasibility, and outcome? Addressing this question and employing the lessons learned to improve the prototype is yet one principal step in the process of crafting a larger scale response to what likely stands as a serious community issue.

The startup is a physical manifestation of the design. It is a prototype in that it stands as a preliminary but unproven model of action, yet one that is promising, full of potential, and ready for further testing. And, it is a startup because the innovation the prototype embodies is relatively new or even nascent.

The startup is just that—a starting point for a response to a particular set of challenges and issues a given community faces. It is emergent since the start up comes from a given context in which multiple groups engaged in a collaborative process of co-creative work. This collaborative effort can result in insight into the need for and relevance of the prototype and can chart further development of the prototype into its evolution as a full scale

response. And, potentially it is a model to others since the prototype is a visible example of what the community seeks to bring about to improve quality of life.

Community-Based Evaluation Practice in the Process of Action Research and Development: The Value of Context Evaluation

Evaluation within community-based participatory action research and development serves an important role in all stages of the developmental cycle. The authors envision the meta-model of change as a cyclical form of action in which the completion of one cycle begets yet one more as social administrators or community practitioners who may now serve as evaluators work closely with team members to formulate and judge action at particular stages of development taking place within specific contexts.

Such contexts are likely community ones and so the practitioner may function as a community-evaluator. For the evaluator working developmentally using both discovery-oriented and illuminative methods, context is one of the most meaningful aspects of the action research and development process. Context reminds evaluators that they do not operate within a vacuum but otherwise operate in real life situations, whether systems, organizations, or communities (Moxley & Manela, 2000).

For social administrators, context involves numerous layers of overlapping levels, facets and situations. Context includes those qualities community members traditionally appreciate: the community as place with distinctive cultural, social, and historical contours, social needs, political issues, infrastructure, organizational networks, and the multiple manifestations of the consequences of social problems. Those aspects are indicative of a descriptive and analytic approach to community development in which the ecology of the community is a principal focus of understanding. But participants can also highlight the importance

of community assets and how they evolve out of tradition, history, culture, and innovations for coping with or transcending the social issues that may be so prevalent in a given community context.

The context will serve as the host of the innovative product of action research and development, that is, the prototype as small scale start up. The context can shape the resulting innovative object and, in turn, the object can shape the context. However, within the conceptual framework of social research and development, the object is yet to take an embodied form, and so it is critical that evaluators fully address meaningful aspects of a given context and how they influence if not determine properties of the prototype. Of course, this evaluative work is not undertaken alone. Involving those individuals and groups who within a given context experience marginalization is an important methodological objective of context evaluation. With their firsthand knowledge of a social issue, they can guide and facilitate evaluative action as they become involved as designers, participants, and decision-makers in crafting a valid evaluation that is essential to the early stages of prototyping. Appreciating context as a first step in evaluation offers a sound starting point for action research and development work in community contexts the purpose of which is to prototype a promising response to those issues community members describe and prioritize. Whether a prototype is intrinsic or instrumental is important here. Intrinsic prototypes--formulated for and by community members---rally energy, focus on immediate needs and issues, and channel action locally. Intrinsic work means a community is engineering a response to a situation community members seek to alter in a locally meaningful way because it will improve their circumstances directly. Whether this response is meaningful in other similar communities may emerge as an important objective of subsequent instrumental research and development in which evaluators work to engage in so-called scale up projects. For participatory research and development

within a given context instrumental work may emerge as a product of useful and successful intrinsic prototyping although this is not an end in itself. For it is within intrinsic work that need, issues, and responses operating within a given community are the ultimate targets the action research and development project seeks to address through local innovation

For community evaluators to remain mindful of the immediate, local situation, as well as of those current challenges the community faces, is so very critical to the legitimacy and accountability they require for successful execution of a prototype in a given community (Manela & Moxley, 2002). The practitioner remains mindful of certain success factors. Foremost is the evaluator's identification with the community as a whole and with the formation and subsequent improvement of an object community groups imbue with considerable value and relevance.

The intrinsic worth of the early design and the subsequent initial prototype reflect what community groups see as important if not critical in addressing those issues they find significant. Here the action research and development process, very early in its initial cycle, moves back and forth between issue assessment, an identification of those properties of social issues the response must address, and an early conceptual formulation of a desirable response.

Through this formative work the prototype emerges—it emerges from the consilience of needs and asset assessment, concept formation and early design, and consensual endorsement of direction through engagement, participation, and dialogue among key stakeholders, particularly those who have not traditionally exerted control over the direction action (whether social, programmatic, or policy) can take in a given community.

Context evaluation, therefore, is a pivotal activity in influencing subsequent stages of action research and development in social

service administration or community development practice. It can blend seamlessly into subsequent steps such as evaluation geared to further refine the prototype and deepen its content in meaningful ways. Inclusion of state of the art reviews, examination of research, and consideration of useful ideas from other venues in a think tank approach extend the helix of action research and development through the enactment of four evaluative objectives: (1) evaluation to judge the situation and context, (2) research utilization to facilitate idea generation and concept formation, (3) surfacing a useful metaphor guiding subsequent design work, and (4) formulation of an early conceptual design of the prototype.

Evaluators here may find themselves taking on a diverse role set including facilitator, knowledge utilization specialist, and designer. What matters most, however, given the participatory aims of action research and development, is that the process is inclusive and decision-oriented since early object formation is a product of civic engagement. It is those properties of process that invest "social" with considerable meaning within the framework of action research and development: while a prototype serves social ends, its formation is best if it is a product of social interaction.

The prototypic object may take on further form through broad-based involvement of various stakeholder groups supported through the use of social technologies like charettes. Borrowing from architecture and the design sciences, charettes portray a possible vision of what community groups want. A vision charette brings into pictorial form all of the analysis and value clarification that occurs within diverse community meetings (Condon, 2008). In other words, it makes use of a range of data evaluators capture through context evaluation, concept formation, and early prototyping. Flowing from the vision charette can be the implementation charette, which details how the object will come

into existence using the knowledge of those who have strong interests in the project.

Both vision and implementation charettes are plans that add perspective to the emerging prototype, and they enable groups to further express or otherwise make explicit their own desires, values, aims, and specific goals. Making values explicit within the prototyping process is an important step in facilitating the further development of product. From such processes the prototype takes on added form and likely emerges as a potentially tangible object.

The Convergence of Context and Input Evaluation for Resource Development

In the process of prototyping, community evaluators may expect the convergence of context and input evaluation. From the two forms of charette, vision, and implementation, those involved in the action research and development process can anticipate the design requirements of the projected object, and formulate insight into those inputs the implementation of the vision of the prototypic object requires. Input evaluation may require considerable data collection, the costs of other analogue models, the delineation of the resource requirements of the prototype, and the formulation of a specific budget whether this anticipates the startup, operation or growth of the prototype.

Positioning the project at this point for subsequent resource development makes considerable sense. The participatory features of the project bring in potentially diverse perspectives from the stand point of those who value the object or the intended results it promises to bring about. An empowerment-orientation imbues various stakeholders, particularly minority ones, and those groups who experience marginalization, with considerable voice—a say in how the immediate context of community life influences the prototype and its features. Input evaluation produces a profile of resource requirements and can result in both start-up, operational,

and growth budgets. Translating context and participatory values into inputs adds to the stakeholders' support of the object. The community evaluator may work with various constituencies in identifying further the assets of the given context and, as a result, identify potential matching resources, whether these are in-kind or cash.

Insight into the total budget the prototypic design requires and the amounts of specific line items is an important product of prototyping. Those involved in the project can initiate useful resource development steps: (1) justifying resource requirements consistent with the start-up and long range budgetary plans, (2) prospecting for potential funders or donors, (3) refining needs statements, problem definitions, and conceptual models for subsequent inclusion in fund development campaigns, (4) development plans for expansion of the project and for sustainability, (5) securing letters of support identifying the importance of the project within the given context and, perhaps more importantly, securing letters of commitment or memoranda of agreement in which stakeholders identify their willingness to contribute resources supporting implementation of the prototypic design, and (6) formulating the proposed measurement of success. For participants an active phase of resource development ensues as they search for funds, equipment, facilities, and supplies. Their preparation of the tools to secure funding, such as proposals, benefits greatly from the early evaluation activities of the project, the involvement of multiple stakeholders, and the formulation of the vision and implementation strategies inherent in charette.

Over the course of this early period evaluators can be instrumental in helping participants bring about the fund development infrastructure by comingling data and narrative specifying critical aspects of the prototype any subsequent proposal and dialogue with potential funders and donors will require. Data from context evaluation, evaluation of the prototypic design, input evaluation and proposed outcome measurement can

inform greatly those documents project participants will need to engage funders or donors, such as the needs statement, case statement, and an initial letter of inquiry. Informing those documents with considerable timely and relevant evaluation data can help potential funders and donors better understand the intent of the project and of the stakeholders who animate the process of small-scale prototyping.

The Usefulness of Implementation Evaluation

Securing start-up funding can spur the evaluation enterprise further and move it into implementation analysis and evaluation. Here evaluators can strengthen the prototyping process by helping stakeholders and project leaders secure those data useful in stimulating implementation of the project and achieving early milestones of performance. The concept of implementation effectiveness will become increasingly meaningful as the evaluator facilitates the production of an implementation plan and offers data on accountability of the process, and how well project stakeholders achieve important milestone objectives.

Evaluation that supports the implementation of the prototype can occur differentially across the stages of prototyping. Early in implementation the evaluator may translate data from funding requirements, design documents, proposals, and strategy into specific tools to steer or otherwise guide implementation. The community-based research and development evaluator can bring into the early implementation phase essential tasks, deliverables, time frames and quality measures and facilitate, as a result, implementation planning. Implementation evaluation can help participants grasp the necessary speed of implementation, and the nature of the progress they must make. The evaluator can create a systematic reporting system equipping participants with the requisite information they require to achieve necessary milestones. Reports, even simple ones, written or verbal, can help

participants come to think through their progress in implementing the prototype design.

Perhaps implementation evaluation is one of the most important of the multiple forms evaluation within action research and development will incorporate, a practical tool to facilitate progress, and useful in helping participants cycle through decisions to catalyze their realization of the vision a charette embodies. Thus, the two charette products, the visionary and implementation ones, can serve as touchstones guiding the process of implementation evaluation. As touchstones, during early implementation, participants have reference points useful in steering their work, and in making those decisions essential to shaping the prototype.

Evaluation of Performance and Outcome for Asserting Proof of Concept

As the prototype moves towards successful early implementation the community evaluator working with stakeholders will likely shift into both performance assessment and outcome monitoring. Performance assessment can illuminate the extent to which the prototype is performing in a desirable manner. For those prototypes in which the provision of service or support to specific individuals or groups is essential performance assessment will likely focus on the process of helping or rendering assistance, while those prototypes involving the enhancement of place will focus on the production of supports for quality of environment, or quality of life.

Quality management or improvement may become an important aim of evaluation as community-based research and development evaluators turn their attention to how and to what extent the prototype produces desired outcomes in those domains of life the prototype seeks to improve for intended beneficiaries. Given the stage of development of the prototype, the evaluator is helping

shape the form of the prototype consistent with its vision and plan of implementation, and its outcome aims. Fostering participant efforts to shape the prototype, a product of the interplay the project achieves by linking additional implementation evaluation and outcome monitoring, can add value to the prototype as it is coming into further form given the consequences the participants' decisions hold for refining the prototype over the course of implementation or trial use.

At some given time the participants will recognize that the prototype has evolved into a form that possesses enough coherence to judge its merit or worth. Here the prototype is tangible, real and functional. The systematic evaluation of the prototype allows participants and stakeholders to assess process outcomes and their costs to continue or expand the model. The participants will have in hand the empirical data they need to assert proof of concept. That is, they can either say the operational manifestation of the prototype is promising and thereby determine whether it should continue in its tangible, real, and functional form or whether it requires considerable reshaping, retooling or reformulation highlighting the important role evaluation in community-based research and development can serve in supporting summative decision-making. Or, certainly the participants could chose to abandon the prototype, and embrace a different community strategy resulting in the staging of yet another prototype.

Assuming that the participants can use outcome data to assert with some confidence that the prototype achieves the standards they set for proof of concept, the community-based research and development evaluator may move into a documentary role now approaching the prototype as a case study. The case study can incorporate the documentation of the process of change, the actual issues participants faced and resolved, and the resulting product as a proof of concept study. The reference points of proof of concept can return the founders of the prototype to the issues the

prototype is designed to address, the rationale for action research and development, the original design and development objectives, and the promising outcomes the prototype demonstrates in relationship to community context.

As an intrinsic product, the case study can help participants appreciate the distance they have traveled, their progress, and their accomplishments. And, they can come to appreciate what makes the prototype distinctive within the community in which they reside. Very importantly the case study can facilitate subsequent decision making about diffusing the prototype, engaging in a process of scaling up the prototype, or working on sustainability all of which are essential to facilitating the maturation of the object.

It is this case study that can help stakeholder groups appreciate the capacities or competencies they have developed useful in addressing an issue they have come to define collaboratively. Such local problem-solving is indeed a learning process, one that takes on even more influence if the groups engage in the process of scaling the product by making the prototype a permanent feature of the community terrain. Here the prototype is translated into the permanent but neophyte entity that will work further to create community capacity. This process translates those practices the prototype offers into features of the new organization and the "lessons learned" from prototyping can influence further the translation of learning from the prototype into organizational development. Here there are three key questions: (a) how do participants address the weaknesses in design the prototype reveals? (b) what important and proven qualities of the prototype does the new organization embody?, and (c) how does the community nurture the new organization in its early period of development so that vulnerabilities do not become overwhelming? Technical assistance, consultation, specific funding for this period, community support, and facilitation of the movement of project participants into key leadership roles are

important tasks of what reflects a process of translation and adaptation.

Conclusion: Ethical Considerations

For social administrators the ethics of community-based participatory action research and development emanate from its purpose--typically one in which there is a focus on the intrinsic features of community change. Unlike instrumental efforts undertaken by academics, research entities, government bureaus and their officials, and large nonlocal foundations, the aims of which are to develop a national or more encompassing model of action, intrinsic work focuses the attention of the social service administrator on orchestrating a prototype to meet specific challenges a local community faces in its everyday existence.

And, in intrinsic work social service administrators set aside those instrumental aims that can divert their energy and attention from their immediate local focus. The practitioners' recognition of the intrinsic obligation they hold allows them to set aside other interests that can conflict with those the immediate community possesses. While readers may feel this is overly simplistic since communities themselves are often times a coalition of conflicting and countervailing interests, in those situations, conflict models of community organizing may be more appropriate than the kind of prototyping the authors offer in this paper.

The approach the authors offer identifies participation as an important correction to divisive situations. Participation here is not a token value too often actualized to co-opt those groups who may conflict with actions more powerful agents take within a community (Selznick, 2002). The ethic of participation recognizes an inherent right of community members to influence if not control the act of prototyping, particularly if the emergent object possesses some immediate value to advancing the community's quality of life.

An ethic of participation goes hand in hand with the intrinsic value of community-based participatory action research and development. The intrinsic nature of a project recognizes that the prototype is a product of community effort and becomes part of the commonweal of the community, as an essential part of its capacity, which itself is a product of the network of knowledge the community possesses (Hess, & Ostrom, 2006). That is, it is a community asset with shared ownership among community members. Of course, although community members can benefit from the asset directly, they likely express this ownership in a proxy manner—they assign their interests to a community board that has the legal standing to guide the emerging organization in an accountable fashion (assuming that the prototype transitions into a start-up or large scale entity), and has an ethical obligation to steward organizational viability.

Leaders of the entity accept an ethical responsibility to nurture the prototype so that it has a good chance to thrive, perhaps emerging as what Selznick (1994) refers to as a vital and viable local community institution. It is through this process that communities can produce tangible capabilities for meeting human needs (Nussbaum, 2011). Those capabilities recognize the vulnerability of human kind and are responsive to this vulnerability across the human life span within a given community (Nussbaum, 2007).

As a tool of what Rothman (2008) refers to as community capacity development it is the specific intent of community-based participatory action research and development to create community assets. It assumes that broad based availability of assets within a given community exists for further development, or that the community possesses the leadership to build relevant assets in their absence through the involvement of broadly representative groups (McGrath, Moffatt, George, & Less, 1999).

Some critics may assert that such assumptions are unwarranted or dismiss this form of action research as merely a retreat into technics. But a sound participatory process with an intrinsic focus mustering considerable engagement among members of a local community is perhaps a best practice. This practice is especially useful in helping a community become adept at engaging in continuous cycles of creative action resulting in the emergence of tangible quality of life assets. Each cycle can initiate, expand, and sustain assets many communities need desperately to improve the quality of life of their members.

Critics may say that the process the authors outline is too demanding for any community, particularly for those that must move fast to address the social ills they face. But those involved in action research, particularly leaders, should recognize the inherent learning process of the approach the authors outline. The tempo of the process is inherent in the decision of the stakeholders concerning how quickly they wish to proceed. All of the various activities the authors outline can be undertaken in time-limited and rapid ways consistent with the felt and real urgency community members experience. The systematic nature of the process may be antithetical to some cultures of learning, but time, urgency, and tempo are all under the control of stakeholders who can factor those variables into project design. For those stakeholders who find the process the authors outline as unrealistic they can, of course, find one that fits better the kind of culture of learning most consistent with the way they wish to take action.

In addition to tangible community products, such as new forms of helping, and social action, communities can realize ancillary benefits found in the inclusion of multiple groups in commerce with one another, participation and involvement of members; and collaborative engagement of local institutions in resolving the intrinsic issues a community faces, perhaps even in innovative

ways, and in a manner other communities may wish to emulate (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2010).

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How a Coding Error Sparked Short-Term Reform at a Custodial Mental Hospital

Robert Sommer

Abstract

This article highlights the important role played by the research consultant in action research (AR) with organizations lacking experience in behavioural research. In this case, the consultant helped staff of a custodial mental hospital conduct a community survey. When the consultant departed, hospital staff did not realize that questionnaire items had been counterbalanced. The uproar created by the incorrectly scored items, which cast the hospital in a negative light, resulted in several positive reforms. Without further prodding, most of the reforms proved temporary.

Keywords: Survey research, serendipity, mental hospital reform, state hospital

My research fellowship at Southeast Louisiana State Hospital ended early when I declined to work on a lobotomy project initiated by the hospital's research director. Employment listings in 1956 showed several positions open at Larned State Hospital in Western Kansas. I had heard about Larned when I was a research assistant at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka. It was the place to which Menningers exiled psychiatric residents who were not doing well in the program. There was not a single board certified psychiatrist on the staff and there were always vacant positions, one of which specified a research psychologist. Since this was my interest at the time, I applied for the position and was hired.

At Larned I was assigned to the criminally insane building as a ward psychologist but my major responsibility, as described by the chief psychologist, was to start a research program that would involve a wide range of staff. There was no tradition of clinical research at the hospital and no infrastructure or support. These were not insurmountable barriers as I had become interested in Kurt Lewin's action research (Lewin, 1948, 1948) whose dominant method at the time was the community self-survey (Harding, 1949; Selltiz, 1949. In this approach, a group or organization with a problem consults a researcher who acts as a consultant, assisting the group to obtain needed information by way of a survey conducted, scored, and subsequently applied by the group itself. In this endeavour, the researcher trades off some control but in return receives free labour and increased relevance of the survey questions, and more likely application of the results by the group which feels ownership of the findings (Sommer, 1987).

Consistent with my interest in AR, I welcomed the opportunity to do research that might actually be used in the place where I worked. During my fellowship at Southeast Louisiana Hospital, I sat in the Psychology Department office correlating psychological test scores with information on the patients' charts. I obtained several publications from these studies but nothing directly useful to the hospital.

In 1957, Larned State Hospital had 1500 beds and was located three miles from a town of 5000. The nearest city of any size was 120 miles away. My duties as a ward psychologist were conventional in terms of testing and report writing. My first opportunity to use action research came during planning for Mental Health Week when people from surrounding communities were invited to visit the hospital. This was the fifth year for the program and over 15,000 visitors had attended previously. I was surprised by the amount of staff time and effort devoted to planning and preparations. For many individuals and departments, hospital routines seemed to "stand still" as

innumerable committees were busy making displays, planning panel discussions, and coordinating the movement of staff and visitors throughout the institution. It was difficult to estimate the amount of time spent by the staff in planning and staging four-days of programs (1000 person hours seemed conservative) which included a Family Day, Student Day, Clergy Day, and County Officials Day. During these four days, almost all staff meetings and professional activities were curtailed or cancelled.

No information was available as to the effectiveness of the previous displays, panel discussions, and tours in terms of public education. If visitors arrived believing that the hospital was "like a prison" and departed with the same belief, and interest in mental health issues was not increased, it might have been more fruitful for the staff to devote itself exclusively to patient welfare. There was also the possibility that the public might be better educated by lectures in community settings to service clubs and school groups. The bleak grounds, barred windows, and locked wards of this hospital which opened in 1914, were not attractive or edifying. Other than hospital staff, a considerable portion of townspeople, residing only three miles from a state hospital named after their town, had never visited the institution, and often referred to it as the "State Farm" or in less flattering terms.

In view of the effort expended by staff on Mental Health Week, I felt that evaluation of its effects on visitor attitudes would be useful. I made this suggestion to the chief psychologist who took it to various planning groups and to the hospital superintendent. Since the seven-person Psychology staff would do all the work, approval was readily granted even though the hospital had no previous experience in research. Members of the Psychology staff met several evenings in the chief psychologist's house on the hospital grounds to generate survey questions. Because I lacked knowledge of the event program and the visitors, my role was that of research consultant who converted people's ideas into

survey questions. I also gave brief instruction to psychology staff on sample selection and questionnaire administration.

Over 1730 visitors attended one of the days (Monday through Thursday), of whom 430 received and filled out questionnaires. On Friday after work the Psychology staff met in the chief psychologist's house to tabulate the results by hand. We met again on Saturday to discuss the results and their implications for future Mental Health Week planning. On Sunday I summarized the material for a report to the hospital administration and to various departments.

The finished report generated widespread amazement at all levels that the Psychology staff could do useful research so quickly (over a long weekend) and so efficiently without any expenditure of funds. For the first time, professional staff in other departments became excited about research and wanted to participate in it. I was assigned two tasks—- to prepare the survey results for publication in a professional journal and to suggest ideas for future hospital-wide research projects. I wrote several drafts of a potential journal article listing all Psychology staff as co-authors. The final draft was circulated to the hospital administration before being submitted and accepted by a mental health journal (Sommer, Dirks, Gardiner, et al., 1958).

I offered two suggestions for a further study with hospital-wide implications-- an evaluation of the team system operating on the wards and a study of community attitudes toward the hospital. The first suggestion was deemed too controversial (some staff were known to dislike the team system) but the second suggestion which offended no hospital constituency was readily accepted. I worked with Psychology staff developing items for a community survey. The items were checked with other hospital departments and with the administration before the final questionnaire was reproduced for mailing to households in nearby communities.

This was my last official act as staff psychologist at Larned State Hospital. I had found a position at an award-winning Canadian mental hospital with a progressive superintendent at the forefront of innovation and experimentation. I have described my use of AR in that setting in previous articles (Sommer, 1983, 1999). Between jobs, I spent the summer at my parents' home in Pennsylvania. It was there I received an anguished letter from the chief psychologist at Larned describing some very negative community attitudes expressed in survey responses toward the hospital and its staff. Fifteen hundred miles away from the scene, I tried to calm him down and make sense of the responses. However, the chief psychologist believed that the situation required immediate action. With the backing of the hospital administration, he recruited influential townspeople to serve on a hospital-community liaison committee intended to increase understanding and cooperation on both sides.

I asked the chief psychologist to mail me the tabulated results. Our correspondence using the postal service took weeks. Seeing the tabulated responses alerted me to what had occurred. One item revealed 90% negative attitudes toward the hospital; the next item showed 80% positive responses, and this continued throughout the tabulation. Typical of how people read survey responses (along with personnel and teaching evaluations), negative comments stand out even when there are only a few of them. In this case the number of negative responses on some items was in the 80-90% range. I could understand why the chief psychologist and the hospital administration were upset.

I had known that the clinical staff who saw these results lacked training and experience in survey research. They were not aware that counterbalancing positive and negative items is routine in questionnaire construction. Staff had scored and interpreted all items unidimensionally. This revealed the limitations of AR when the research consultant is not on the scene. By the time I called the coding errors to their attention, the community-hospital

committees were going full speed and had produced increased contact and understanding.

Rescoring the questionnaires according to counterbalanced items showed positive community attitudes toward the hospital, generally in the 80-90% range. Nonetheless, the liaison committees were considered so beneficial to both community and hospital that they continued and became the basis of an award submission by the hospital. Chief Psychologist Steve Pratt led these liaison meetings and became senior author of an article describing the community survey using the corrected results (Pratt, Giannitrapani, & Khanna, 1960). The Kansas Health Department took note of these favorable developments at a state hospital that had previously been considered the weakest in the system.

When hospital superintendent J. T. Naramore retired in 1961 after 16 of service, a period of instability followed with four superintendents appointed in the next 14 months, the last of whom was Chief Psychologist Steve Pratt, the first time a non-medical person was appointed Acting Superintendent of a state psychiatric hospital in Kansas. Pratt continued in this capacity until 1963 when he was replaced by psychiatrist George L. Wadworth, Assistant Commissioner of the Ohio Division of Mental Hygiene. Pratt returned to his previous position as chief psychologist at Larned, and in 1966 was appointed superintendent of Jacksonville State Hospital in Illinois, this time in a full rather than an acting capacity, where he remained until retirement.

Discussion

I would like to say that the reforms initiated after the formation of the hospital-community liaison committees persisted and changed the culture of the institution. Sadly there is no evidence that this occurred. The situation at the hospital as revealed in state records and newspaper reports show continuing problems recruiting personnel at all levels, high staff turnover, and frequent

investigation of hospital conditions by state agencies. The most recent accrediting team noted numerous deficiencies, most of which had existed for years:

During the last 5 years the hospital lost more than two-thirds of its medical staff and employees complain they work overtime to the point they are physically and mentally exhausted…state officials have difficulty getting nurses from temp agencies to take shifts at the hospital even for short spells…Joint Commission inspectors called the hospital's high turnover rate 'alarming' and told state officials that they must quickly correct the problems…or lose accreditation. (KHI, 2012)

While several other Kansas state hospitals and programs have closed, including Topeka State Hospital, which earlier had been the state's flagship mental institution, Larned State Hospital remains open, largely due to its housing the state's only criminally insane unit. The hospital's annual Mental Health Week program goes on, and now includes a professional conference with invited speakers. The hiring of non-medical superintendents, began in 1963, also continues, and the last three superintendents have been clinical psychologists.

There are several lessons for action researchers in this experience. The first collaborative project, the Mental Health Week evaluation, generated widespread enthusiasm among staff and a desire to become more involved in research. It raised the status of the Psychology Department which was encouraged by the administration to undertake further studies. Publication of the results in a professional journal with seven co-authors brought recognition to the institution and to the participants.

As a follow-up to this initial success, the research consultant helped staff put together a second study, a community survey on attitudes toward the hospital, and then departed before the results were tabulated. This should not have been problematic except that the staff lacked experience in survey research and did not realize

that the order of favorable and unfavorable statements had been counterbalanced. When they saw the preponderance of seemingly negative responses to some items, they panicked and formed liaison committees designed to change community attitudes. These committees brought together senior hospital staff and business people from the town in a common effort. By the time the coding error was detected, the joint hospital-community committees seemed so beneficial to all stakeholders that the meetings were continued and became part of an award submission by the hospital. An account of the survey results using corrected figures was published in a professional journal, again bringing recognition to the hospital and the participants. The chief psychologist who initiated the project became the first non-medical acting superintendent of a public psychiatric hospital in the state and later a full superintendent of a hospital in another state.

AR which follows an unpredictable schedule, often with lay people involved in data collection and analysis, increases the likelihood of serendipitous events. If the initial coding of the survey responses had been done correctly, it is doubtful that it would have provoked anything like the motivating effects of the reversed scores. I do not suggest that action researchers deliberately make mistakes to energize lay participants, but the idea of generating affect during the research process, where administering questionnaires, coding, and tabulating responses can appear dull and dry to lay people, seems valid.

In a tradition-bound setting such as a custodial mental hospital, successful reform must be an ongoing process. It can be sparked by a single event or individual but for it to persist and grow requires internal leadership, a base of support both within and outside the setting, achievable goals, and reinforcement for the participants. A good test of the AR approach is that the participants are better off afterward than they were before. At the time, Larned State Hospital had been regarded as the least

progressive institution in the state mental health system, and staff either adjusted to the lack of change or departed. New superintendents came and went and the basic structure of the hospital persisted. Action research flowered briefly and then withered as the key players moved on to better positions. Fifty years later, the hospital remains the subject of unfavorable newspaper reports and repeated state investigations.

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Acknowledgement

Improving Indigenous Women's Wellness Through Action Research

Melissa Walker, Bronwyn Fredericks, Debra Anderson

Abstract

This paper describes an action research project undertaken with Indigenous women in the highly urbanised area of north Brisbane. The project was a collaborative effort to move beyond the alarming statistics of Indigenous women's poor health status. It aimed to build a community-based, empowering forum for celebrating and encouraging wellness in a way that was culturally appropriate for Indigenous women. Using a Feminist Participatory Action Research perspective, the authors incorporated the traditional Indigenous method of yarning to work with local Indigenous women Elders and organised two highly successful Women's Wellness Summits. This paper provides evidence that Feminist Participatory Action Research is an appropriate way of working with urban Indigenous women. It allows Indigenous worldviews to be considered, and fosters a cyclical and conversational approach to research practice. This paper also demonstrates that the emerging method of yarning is highly successful in Indigenous research.

Keywords: Women, Indigenous, wellness, health, action research, urban, Australia

Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women – Australia's Indigenous women or First Nations women – are the most socially and economically disadvantaged population group in Australia. They also have the poorest health status (AIHW, 2011).

The life expectancy of Indigenous women is 9.7 years lower than for other Australians (AIHW, 2011, p. ix). They have increased levels of cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease and kidney disease. For example, Indigenous women are 11 times more likely than other Australians to get coronary heart disease, and 13 times more likely to get rheumatic fever (p. 49).

There is a widespread myth in Australia that most Indigenous women live in regional or remote areas and that this may account for their health disadvantage. However, 75% of all Indigenous Australians live in urban or peri-urban areas (ABS, 2011). They have geographical proximity to health services, so remoteness and poor access cannot explain their health status.

Although the statistics about Indigenous women's health are alarming, statistics fail to demonstrate how Indigenous women understand their wellness and health status, or how they aim for a higher level of overall wellness. The statistics do not show how Indigenous women manage, function, survive and sometimes thrive, despite their poor health.

In this research with Indigenous Australian women, we aim to move beyond the health statistics to focus on wellness. We seek to work with Indigenous women towards developing an effective wellness program. To do this, we use an action research approach to explore what Indigenous women recognise their wellness to be and what they want to have within a wellness program. In this paper, we argue that Feminist Participatory Action Research is an

appropriate and effective method for engaging with Indigenous women around health and wellness.

Throughout this paper, we use the term Indigenous Australian women in reference to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, except when we refer to Aboriginal women or Torres Strait Islander women specifically or when we use a quote that specifically refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We acknowledge that both Melissa Walker and Bronwyn Fredericks are Aboriginal women and Debra Anderson is a non-Indigenous Australian woman.

Starting the process

We began the research by reflecting on the evidence about the most appropriate ways of working with Indigenous Australian women. At the start of our research, it was 20 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report (RCIADIC, 1991) was published. The RCIADIC report includes two recommendations (numbers 320 and 330) that specifically identify action research as the preferred approach for conducting research with Indigenous communities.

Recommendation 330 states:

Research into patterns, causes and consequences of Aboriginal [problems] should not be conducted for its own sake. Such research is only justified if it is accepted by Aboriginal people as necessary and as being implemented appropriately. Action research of the type that produces solutions to problems is likely to be seen by Aboriginal people as being most appropriate. (RCIADIC, 1991, Recommendation No. 330)

Recommendation 320 states:

Where research is commissioned or funded, a condition of the research being undertaken should be the active involvement of Aboriginal people in the area which is the subject of the research, the communication of research findings across a wide cross-section of the Aboriginal community in an easily understandable form, and the formulation of proposals for further action by the Aboriginal community and local Aboriginal organisations. (RCIADIC, 1991, Recommendation No. 320)

Our research with Indigenous Australian women was grounded in a commitment to fulfilling the intention of the RCIADIC recommendations quoted above. We recognise that action research offers a way for Indigenous women to be involved in research, and to direct and drive it.

As we developed our research plans, we drew on Rigney's (2001) perspective to recognise that, if research is to make a difference, it needs to be grounded within the political reality of the lives of the people who participate. We also acknowledged Stringer's (1996) statement, that 'those who have previously been designated as "subjects" should participate directly in research processes and that those processes should be applied in ways that benefit all participants directly' (p. 7).

We built the project on the understanding that the research would begin by working with a group, community or organisation to define the problems, situations and issues relevant to the participants. The work would then involve the group, community or organisation in working towards change, finding solutions or developing answers (Glesne, 1990; Stringer, 1996).

This research began in 2011, when the three authors of this paper started to work with Andrea Sanders from Diabetes Australia Queensland to think about ways to focus on the wellness of

Indigenous Australian women in place of the usual focus on sickness and poor health. We began to think about ways that action research could be used to encourage Indigenous women to focus on wellness. From the outset, we agreed to undertake this research in Brisbane, Queensland, a city with over one million people and an Indigenous population of 50,000 (ABS, 2011).

Drawing on previous work

Our commitment to action research was supported by the increasing acceptance in the literature of research that involves Indigenous women as both researchers and participants (for example, Acklin et al., 1995; Daylight & Johnstone, 1986; Fredericks, 2003, 2008; Harrison, 1991; Huggins & Huggins, 1996; Kirk et al., 2000). This work provides legitimation to Indigenous women's voices in texts and to reports authored by them as Indigenous women. The research techniques being used by Indigenous women include yarning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010), story-telling (Reinhardz, 1992) and autobiography (Huggins & Huggins, 1996). These works stand in contrast to Brady's (1998) concern that 'outside [of] autobiography the stories of Indigenous Australia only receive legitimation when written in texts edited or authored by non-Indigenous academics' (p. 1).

Of particular relevance to this research was the work of Kirk and her colleagues (Kirk et al., 2000) who examined cancer amongst Indigenous women. Kirk's project involved semi-structured interviews, case history interviews and group discussions, all conducted under the framework of Feminist Participatory Action Research. The research explored participants' personal experiences, their understandings of breast cancer and their views of care and health services. Through a culturally-safe approach, Kirk's research team and the participants were able to undertake a form of transformation through the research. The project can be linked to developments in policy and programs for Indigenous women.

A feminist approach to action research

We adopted a feminist approach to action research throughout this project – in the broadest possible sense. We agreed that the combination of feminist theories and action research would allow us to raise questions about gender, the nature of the research, and the relationships between the participants and researchers (Glesne, 1999, p. 9). We found links between community-based action research and feminist participatory research in other work, and found frequent discussions of the oppression and exploitation experienced by women (Fonow & Cook, 1991; Fredericks, 2008; Glesne, 1999; Lather, 1991; Rienharz, 1992). These works also address the ways that the varied experiences of women – including the multiple identities of race, class, culture, ethnicity, sexual preference, age, disability and geographic location – can be considered within the research process.

According to Sarantakos (1998), feminist research has the following characteristics:

> … it puts gender in the centre of inquiry; making women visible and representing women's perspectives ... it places emphasis on women's experiences, which are considered a significant indicator of reality and offer more validity than does method ... it discloses distortions related to such experiences. It sees gender as the nucleus of women's lives, shaping of consciousness, skills, institutions and distribution of power and privilege. It is preoccupied with social construction of 'knowing and being known'. It is politically value laden and critical, and as such it is not methodic, but clearly dialectical. This implies that it is an imaginative and creative process which engages oppressive social structures. It is not solely about women but primarily for women, taking up an emancipationist stance, it entails an anti-positivist orientation. It is supposed to use multiple methodologies and paradigms. (Sarantakos, 1998, p. 63)

These characteristics of feminist research were a comfortable fit with the framework for the research that we were developing. We adopted a Feminist Participatory Action Research perspective (Lather, 1991; Mies, 1983; Nielsen, 1990; Rienharz, 1992), which we adapted to fit within the context of urban Indigenous Australian women. This perspective allowed us to explore issues of gender, race and Western domination (Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Rigney, 2001; Smith, 1999) within the community partnerships that developed through the research.

Beginning the dialogue

Our commitment to a Feminist Participatory Action Research perspective meant that we sought to work with Indigenous Australian women through processes that were familiar and comfortable for the women involved. We drew on the practice of yarning – a conversational practice that involves the telling and sharing of stories.

Yarning takes place naturally amongst Indigenous women and men, and is becoming increasingly accepted as a research technique (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Dulwich Centre, 2010; Franks & Curr, 1996; Fredericks et.al., 2011; Towney, 2005). Yarning follows language protocols and results in the acquisition of new meaning (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). In this way, yarning is an ideal way of gathering information and creating conversations that are culturally ascribed and cooperative. Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010) were the first scholars to discuss yarning in depth. They characterise yarning as 'an Indigenous cultural form of conversation' (p. 37) and identify different forms of yarning, each with a different intention. Whilst the terms 'yarn' and 'yarning' are used by Indigenous people daily, a yarn is always more than simply pleasantries in casual conversation or a light correspondence between people (Fredericks et al., 2011). Dean (2010) describes yarning as a formal research methodology that has the ability to centre Indigenous knowledge systems and

permit partnerships with Indigenous communities. Yarning stands in stark contrast to much of the previous research conducted in Indigenous communities, which has been conducted through Westernised paradigms and ignored the value of culturally appropriate methods.

In the yarns conducted as part of our research, the women who participated followed cultural protocol and recognised both existing relationships and expected outcomes (Fredericks et al., 2011). Through the yarning, the women participating in our research related with each other and determined the accountability between them (Martin, 2008). Through the strength of their existing relationships and the process of yarning, the women become both strong contributors to the research design, and crucial donors of information (providing information and advice both to each other and to the project as a whole) (Dean, 2010). The yarning process enabled the women to become active participants who were directing the research. The research became centred around their values and the community needs and concerns that they identified.

The 'participatory' aspect of our research (Wadsworth, 1997) helped to empower the women who participated. As women became involved in our research, they also developed their capacity for community development, empowerment, and action to support social justice. We found that the yarning process was an important vehicle in supporting this empowerment.

Pushing for a women's gathering

As our research developed, the Indigenous women participants developed a vision for a large Indigenous women's gathering. They were led by local women Elders who we had been referred to us through the consultation, negotiation and agreement phases with Indigenous organisations in North Brisbane. Once we made our final representation to several Indigenous organisations about

this research, including the Moreton Regional Elders Group, we were then asked to work specifically with a small group of Indigenous Elder women. From this point, Indigenous men were only involved if we needed support from the broader Indigenous community organisations (of which they were members and board members) or specifically as Indigenous men living in North Brisbane. The women Elders advised us when this was appropriate, who would do this and in what time frame.

In the yarning process, women Elders talked about the ways that local Indigenous women in the past had done business together, held gatherings, been physically and socially connected and reaffirmed spiritual connections through ceremony on Country. Indigenous women have gathered together in this way for thousands of years, including in areas like Brisbane that are now heavily urbanised and big cities. However, the Indigenous women acknowledged that it is now difficult for Indigenous women to gather, particularly in a city like Brisbane, because they live in different suburbs, work and/or have large family responsibilities.

Through these series of yarns held in a small hall in North Brisbane from March 2011 through to December 2011, the women talked about how their sense of self was, and still is, connected to a collective and connected to all aspects of life, kin, community, Country, culture and spirituality. They recognised that Indigenous women's ways of being, doing and understanding are held by the Elders and passed down through the generations of Indigenous women. Some participants described the way that they missed being with other Indigenous women and longed to be with other Indigenous women, in the sense of longing for one's kin, community and Country. The participants also talked about issues associated with gaining government support for gatherings, and mobility problems such as public transport. The women defined their own problems, situations and issues relevant to the participants. They began to bring forth answers, solutions, and a way forward (Glesne, 1990; Stringer 1996).

Participants' conversations about an Indigenous women's gathering developed into the Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit – a one-day event designed to celebrate wellness. They wanted to put into action their ideas about ways to enable self empowerment of women through the construction and application of their knowledge (Reason et al., 2006; Rigney, 2001; Smith, 1999).

The action research involved Bronwyn Fredericks and Melissa Walker meeting with the North Brisbane Murri Network, a group of some 20 plus organisations and also making representation to other Indigenous organisations in the region.
We then began working with the Bunyabilla Indigenous Corporation Inc to apply for funding and develop the Wellness Summit. Bunyabilla received funding through the Queensland Health Smoke Free Program, Diabetes Australia Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and CQUniversity Australia. The funding allowed the Wellness Summit to be independent of our ongoing, university-based research project about Indigenous women's wellness. Although the Summit grew out of the research project, it was owned by the local community and developed in partnership.

The first Wellness Summit was organised by a small group of Indigenous women, including Melissa Walker, Bronwyn Fredericks and Kyly Mills. Other Indigenous women[1], also helped in the final stages of the planning. A further 15 Indigenous women volunteered to make the Summit a success on the day. We could not have managed without their assistance and freshness to the whole idea of what was trying to be achieved. Indigenous women were engaged across the generations in making the Summit

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[1]   Natahlia Buitendyk, Synthia Hunt, Patrice Harald and Alyse Mills all worked as volunteers. We name these women with permission for their significant contributions in the planning process and support of the Summit.

happen and while we dislike the word 'subjects' for a range of reasons, in regards to action research the 'subjects' were not only participating in the research processes but controlling and directing them to make it benefit all participants. From this perspective, Stringer's (1996) work is extremely useful.

Melissa Walker was the driving force for the group that was entrusted to organise the event on behalf of the local Indigenous women. They agreed that the Wellness Summit should challenge the dominant Western focus on the extent of disease and illness amongst Indigenous women, and focus instead on ways that Indigenous women can work towards wellness as an everyday reality. The event was designed to celebrate wellness by empowering Indigenous women and providing health information in an inviting and safe environment.

The first North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit was held on 9 March 2012 to coincide with International Women's Day. The event was promoted as Women's Business: it was a women-only event, with no men allowed. Creating a women-only space was in-keeping with Indigenous cultural protocols and allowed for a sense of trust and the creation of a safe and relaxed place for Indigenous women to share with each other. Through the program, we encouraged women to consider how they wanted to strive for wellness. The Summit helped to embrace Indigenous women's wellness by demonstrating values that are conducive to their wellbeing – such as sharing, giving, reciprocity, respect and active engagement with other Indigenous women, community, kin, Elders and significant others.

The Summit included stalls and displays by organisations and government departments, which were asked to send only women workers. Stallholders were reminded that they would be within an Indigenous women's event that would be dominated by Indigenous women's ways and activities. While no non-Indigenous volunteers helped at the first Summit, many of the

workers on stalls were non-Indigenous women. They shared in the day with Indigenous women as representatives of their organisations and government departments, and few participated in the activities. Although they were invited to participate in activities like lucky door prizes, some opted not to do so. We were saddened by this opting out of the opportunity to engage with Indigenous women as individuals rather than as workers.

All of the women who attended the event, including the stallholders shared lunch together. The sharing of food brought a way to communicate that extended beyond the service-provider and participant relationship. The lunch was special: it was cut and prepared in the large hall, and cooked in a large oven on wheels that was positioned in the hall. One of the Elders said that, in this way, all of the love, goodwill and sense of Indigenous women's essence was within the room and hence within the food. The food was bound in love, goodwill and sense of spirit. The cooked food was shared on tables within the hall, with young women serving the Elders first. We all ate lunch and cleaned up together. It was a particularly lovely part of the day.

The North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit was the first of its kind for women in North Brisbane. The event helped to reposition Indigenous women as activists who work with other Indigenous women. It offered an opportunity to assert power as Indigenous women within an Indigenous women's arena. The Indigenous women who participated in this process envisioned the North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit and then made a commitment to make it happen. They supported each other in a collective framework and reached their vision.

A second gathering

The Feminist Participatory Action Research perspective implies cycles of participation, with each stage of data gathering

informing later cycles. We used the information gathered through all the dialogue – including the women's evaluation of the Wellness Summit, their qualitative feedback and our analysis of the event to interpret and discuss future action. Women's understandings of knowing and doing were intertwined through the process (Stringer, 2007).

The Elders who participated in the research spent a lot of time talking about the success of the first North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit in the days after the Summit. Melissa and Bronwyn and a number of other Indigenous women were involved in this process. It was a debrief, but it was also the start of the process of critique, analysis and working out what we needed to improve and change in our planning process and the delivery of the Summit. We began to discuss and celebrate what worked really well and needed to be kept for next time. We talked about the tensions with respect to differences of opinion. We shared our reflections in being Indigenous women together and the wonderful fulfilment this brings to us and brought to us at the Summit. We discussed with honesty the difficulties with the site, stallholders and funding and asked ourselves with bluntness, did we in fact include a range of Indigenous women with diverse backgrounds?[2] This process was bound within, whether we honoured all Indigenous women who were involved and Indigenous women's ways? We agreed that all of this information along with the Summit registration details, evaluation sheets, photos and other materials needed to be brought to a meeting to begin the process of adjusting a model.

Feminist Participatory Action Research offered us the capacity to ask these questions and more and to alter the model for future Summits (Lather, 1991; Mies, 1983; Rienharz, 1992). After this the group began to re-vision and look for further funding options,

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[2] For example were all Indigenous women from one Nation/ Tribal affiliation or all Christian or all heterosexual or all married with children or all young or older or Elders?.

and Bunyabilla Indigenous Corporation Inc was successful in seeking additional funding. The Elders then worked closely with Melissa Walker to direct the planning for a second Summit. Younger women played a specific role in serving the Elders, making sure their needs were met, and learning from the Elders as the planning progressed. The group had an ongoing commitment to open and transparent communication, collaboration, and a sharing of the strengths offered by each woman. The collaborative process and Melissa's leadership were crucial to the successful planning and facilitation of the second Summit.

The project team spent considerable time working out what how to build on the first Summit (April-May). The process of reflecting on participants' feedback and listening to the women opened up the space for more meaningful relationships between the researchers and the participants, and in some cases deeper relationships between Indigenous women community members. The process was based on reciprocity, and it built trust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women, respect for each other, and relevance for the process. It also developed the capacity of researchers and participants for inter-cultural and cross-cultural work.

We reflected on what we had discussed in terms of the venue, food, stalls and transport. We also focused on ways to ensure that the venue was once again culturally welcoming and dominated by Indigenous women. Our goal was to create another Indigenous women's gathering, where women could share in a large space, where small intimate conversations could occur, where children could play and be safe, and where health assessments could also take place with some privacy. We knew from the first Summit that Indigenous women liked to be in a large hall where they could be together yet away from the dominant culture's interpretation, subjectivity or judgment.

As we reflected on our roles as facilitators and researchers within the action research process (Bryant, 1996; Chavez et al., 2008), we decided to move away from the 'main speaker' focus of the first Summit towards an approach that focused on the sharing of Indigenous women's stories and some presentations focused around social and emotional wellbeing, healing and self-esteem. We felt that this approach would encourage collaborative action learning. We also devoted more time to art and craft activities, to allow the women more time for networking and informal conversations while they were listening to presentations and having their health assessments. We included a session on smoking in both the first and second Summits as funding was provided by the Queensland Health Smoke Free Program along with Diabetes Australia Queensland, Bunyabilla Indigenous Corporation Inc, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and CQUniversity Australia.

A dynamic group of more than 150 Indigenous Australian women came together to celebrate 'wellness' at the second North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summit held on Friday 22 June 2012. Held once again at the Strathpine Community Centre, the second Summit aimed to celebrate wellness by empowering Indigenous women and providing health information in an inviting and safe women's-only environment. To achieve this, all the Summit literature specified that it was a Women's Business event. This meant that all the stall holders (including government and non-government organisations), health practitioners, community health workers, speakers, caterers and cleaners were to be women.

A combination of health information stalls, Indigenous guest speakers, cooking tucka (food) demonstrations, onsite health checks and Indigenous arts and crafts made for an exciting and inspiring day. A diverse group of government and non-government organisations held stalls supplying health information (some of these stalls were the same as those at the

first Summit). The event provided an overwhelming atmosphere of community energy and women's strength. Most importantly, the second Summit continued our efforts to shift from the 'disease-based' paradigm to a focus on 'wellness'. We believe that this 'wellness' dynamic will provide a platform for the continuing path to good health for these women.

This Summit embraced Indigenous women's wellness by demonstrating values conducive to Indigenous individual and collective wellbeing – including sharing, giving, reciprocity, respect and active engagement with other Indigenous women. Aunty Faye Gundy performed the Welcome to Country, and guest speakers Aunty Honor Cleary and Aunty Selena Seymour captivated the audience through their inspirational words and desire to create strong, proud and well Indigenous women for the future.[3] Bronwyn Fredericks participated in personal and professional ways – as a researcher, a leader, an activist and an Aunty. Melissa Walker, who was the main organiser of the Summit, was showcased as a Registered Nurse, a mother, a PhD student whose work is based on the Summits, and a junior Elder. Bronwyn and Melissa acknowledge the learning they received through working with the Elders and the respect afforded to them through younger Indigenous women. Feminist Participatory Action Research allowed for the diversity of women to be involved but also for Indigenous women's cultural processes to be embedded. This was demonstrated through the generational respect, acknowledgement and the flow and structure of the day in both Summits.

The second Summit saw an increase in volunteer support, with many individuals helping to clean, work in the children's corner

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[3] We name these Elders with their permission for their significant contributions to our knowledge as speakers

and perform health checks and helping with the final planning and on the day.[4]

The process of planning and organising the second event helped to build relationships amongst the volunteers on personal, cultural and community levels. For example, it was wonderful to watch Indigenous and non-Indigenous nursing students working together and sharing the broader Indigenous women's community. The Indigenous young women were keen to be involved on both a professional and community level.

The second Summit once again involved a group of Elders who provided advice with the organisational aspects of the day. These included Aunty Honor Cleary, Aunty Faye Gundy and Aunty Selena Seymour. Through their interaction, we were able to fulfil the needs and values of the community. The wisdom offered by Elder Indigenous women was clear throughout the process. The tradition of respecting Elders and listening to them was upheld throughout the research cycles. The Elders played an important role with all the women, regardless of whether they were participants, volunteers or stall holders.

As part of the Feminist Participation Action Research process, we invited participants to evaluate the Summit in two ways – through evaluation questionnaires and by directly asking for verbal feedback. Participants indicated that they had looked forward to the Summit, enjoyed themselves and left feeling re-invigorated and strong after the day. They felt supported during the event, reported a sense of wellness when they left, and looked forward to the next Summit. Many of the women spoke of how the event was organised by other Indigenous women for them as Indigenous

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[4] This included Crystal Williams, who will soon be registered as a medical doctor and a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous nursing students. Kyly Mills, Natahlia Buitendyk, Patrice Harald, and Synthia Hunt again assisted in the planning and on the day. Their assistance and support was crucial.

women. They felt a sense of ownership and joy in this aspect and believed in the research that was being held alongside the Summits.

The Summit produced an overarching eagerness from attendees to make this a regular occurrence, with suggestions even pointing towards the need for 'portability' so that other communities can reap its benefits. Ultimately, it is through ongoing research and ground-level community activism that we can empower Indigenous women through wellness. This will ensure that Indigenous women continue to be strong, proud and well, both now and for future generations. We now see the Summits as a sustainable women's activity that will help to create an ongoing focus on wellness that underpins and maintains Indigenous wellbeing.

Conclusion

This project provides evidence that Feminist Participatory Action Research is an appropriate way of working alongside Indigenous Australian women on the topic of wellness. Existing research in public health tends to capture the poor statistics of Indigenous women's health. In contrast, this project acknowledges the notion of Indigenous women's 'wellness', and works to create an environment where wellness is fostered and women are empowered. For Indigenous women, 'wellness' extends beyond the disease continuum to include all aspects of lived wellbeing. It is both an individual and collective concept. The two North Brisbane Indigenous Women's Wellness Summits organised through this project allowed for Indigenous women's wellbeing and wellness to be explored and developed.

The Summits offered an opportunity for formal and informal collaborations between experienced and inexperienced researchers, nurses and student nurses, and senior Elders and new/junior Elders. The Summits provided a women's-only

environment with Indigenous women's interests at the heart of the event. Indigenous women could share and experience with other Indigenous women within a culturally safe environment (Coffin, 2007; Fredericks & Thompson, 2010; Ramsden, 2002).

This work provides further evidence that Feminist Participatory Action Research is relevant to Indigenous communities. We believe that it is a 'natural fit' for Indigenous research and Indigenous researchers. It allows Indigenous worldviews to be considered, and fosters a cyclical and conversational approach to research practice. Through cycles of research and action, events such as the Summits can lead to successful interventions and transformation (Lather, 1991; Smith, 1999).

This work also provides further evidence that yarning is an appropriate method for working with Indigenous women in an urban context. Because yarning is a common form of communication that is undertaken daily by Indigenous women, it is a powerful form of information sharing and knowledge building. To achieve accurate, in-depth and respectful research with Indigenous communities, it is essential to incorporate a familiar and culturally appropriate style of information sharing, such as yarning.

The combination of Feminist Participatory Action Research processes, yarning methods, and leadership from the Elders made this an exciting project and offered a synergy seldom seen in academic research.

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Participatory action research and living theory action research in the Northern Territory

Michael Beattie

Abstract

This article is based on my honours thesis, 'You or Me? A Social Framework in support of Indigenous community organisation'. It gives an overview of the reflective learning processes analysed in the thesis as I positioned myself as a community development practitioner in the Indigenous research context in Australia. It draws specifically on theory pertaining to participatory action research, Indigenist research and living theory action research.

Keywords: Aboriginal, Indigenous, community development, action research, living theory, community organisation, crocodile management, Northern Territory

A theoretical journey

At the beginning of my honours degree in Australian Indigenous Cultures and Natural Resource Management at Charles Darwin University (CDU) in Darwin, I was directed by my lecturers to the read the book 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' by Paolo Freire. As I read this book and worked through the subject matter of the degree, I found that Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Indigenist research methodology were common themes in the material I was directed to read in preparation for the research of my thesis.

Identifying as a community development practitioner (CDP) and someone foreign to this context, I could not work out how to do a data analysis in an Indigenous research project whilst also reflecting PAR and Indigenist research methodology. If PAR is about people emancipating themselves from their self-identified problems (Freire, 1996, p. 48), understanding that an external person's attempt to implement change on behalf of participants is to contradict their efforts to support participants in their quest for liberation (p. 36), how was I to do an analysis of an Indigenous research project when I considered myself an outsider? In the true essence of PAR, I saw that I would undermine the theory if I was to do the analysis on behalf of participants.

Exposure to Indigenist research theory contributed further to my confusion. Drawing on libratory epistemologies such as critical feminist theory and the pedagogic thought put forward by Freire, the Indigenist theorist understands that for Indigenous liberation to be experienced, it must be undertaken by Indigenous people themselves (Rigney, 1997, p. 636). Defined as an approach to research that is undertaken 'by Indigenous Australians whose primary informants are Indigenous Australians and whose goals are to serve and inform the Indigenous struggle for self-determination' (p. 637), my background as an immigrant Australian disqualified me from being able to implement this approach.

As I read articles on historic Indigenous-immigrant research relations, emphasis was given to the use of the above methodologies in countering the colonial and positivistic research practices which historically undermined Indigenous worldviews (Winch et al., 1998, p. 26; Ford, 1997, p. 13; Working Party of Aboriginal Historians, 1981, p. 7-8) and defined Indigenous truth on behalf of Indigenous peoples (Martin, 2001, p. 2; Rigney, 1997, p. 634). In putting these theories into practice, it is stated that in Indigenous research, it is important that Indigenous people identify the area of investigation (Martin, 2001, p. 5; Howitt et al.,

1990, p. 2; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1999, p. 3; Tuhiwai Smith, 2007, p. 127; Hecker, 1997, p. 785), design the research methods (Martin, 2001, p. 1; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1999, p. 3; Winch *et al.*, 1999, p. 25), conduct the research (Martin, 2001, p. 5; Howitt *et al.*, 1990, p. 2), analyse and interpret the data (Martin, 2001, p. 6; Tuhiwai Smith, 2006, p. 127; Hecker, 1997, p. 785), and control and implement how knowledge and research conclusions are used (Howitt *et al.*, 1990, p. 2 & 3; Martin, 2001, p. 6).

Understanding these thoughts, my difficulty was how to participate in Indigenous research as a non-local researcher without undertaking any of these roles. As a result, I stalled in my degree. I knew that if I had wanted, I could have chosen a topic myself, collected data from a group of Indigenous people, and made the analysis necessary to complete my thesis. I also knew, however, that if I had approached the research in this way, I would have undermined the voices of the academics above and missed the point of what my lecturers were trying to show me.

After about a year, I was lucky to stumble across the work of Whitehead (1989; 2009), who introduced me to the idea of 'living theory action research', a concept which describes practitioners who critically reflect questions of the type 'How can I improve my practice?' (1989, p. 1). Engaging in a personal and professional action research process, practitioners develop insight and conclusions which result in theory reflective of their daily profession. Seated on the preposition that all practitioners are in a constant state of learning, '[t]he living theory approach to generating theory and understanding in action research is distinguished by individuals [practitioners] producing explanations for their educational influences' (2009, p. 95). It is these changing explanations which culminate into an evolving living and personal work theory.

In using the term 'educational influences', Whitehead makes reference to the dialogue (1989, p. 1), theory (1989, p. 7; 2009, p. 92) and practice (1989, p. 1) with which a practitioner interacts on a daily basis. Also referred to as 'materials of their situations' (Schön, 1987, p. 36) and 'everyday experiences' (Moore, 2002, p. 29), a practitioner's critical reflection of these elements is seen to develop ways of working that the practitioner perceives to be the most effective in achieving their stated aims. Using this interpretive approach to develop one's practice, it is observed that the practitioner's methods of interaction are more likely to be workable and relevant as they stem from their local knowledge and values (McNiff, 2007, p. 223; Wood, 2010, p. 108 & 116; Lomax, 1986, p. 49).

In the case my thesis, living theory action research gave me the ability to participate in an Indigenist PAR project without having to analyse Indigenous participants or direct their processes. Using a living theory approach to learning, the analysis of the thesis would be on the way my educational influences affected the evolution of my thought and practice as a CDP in the Indigenous research context. I would provide participants with a defined facilitating role and examine whether this positioning enabled participants and I to achieve our intended goals. In my case, these goals were my professional ability as a CDP to support participants' access to an enhanced state of autonomy and agency. In the case of participants, their goals would be defined by themselves. By approaching the thesis in this way, I would extricate myself from having to undermine PAR and Indigenist thought.

Central to how I understand my role as a CDP, this removal of certain elements of one's self from a community development project cannot be understated. As a CDP, I see myself as an enabler of

> ...human autonomy or agency – the capacity of
> people to order their world, the capacity to create,
> reproduce, change and live according to their own
> meaning systems, to have powers to define
> themselves as opposed to being defined by others (de
> Certeau, 1986; Giddens, 1984; cited by Bhattacharyya,
> 2004, p. 12).

In supporting these processes, my knowledge and skills are used
at the request of people who want to create spaces which allow
them to assert their voice, participate in decisions which affect
them, and conclude and take actions to change their situations.
Supporting with these spaces, my aim is for participants to
experience values of empowerment, self-determination and
emancipation, integral to obtaining a state of autonomy and
agency (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 13). Although this is a work in
progress, one which for me has spanned over a decade of
community development projects, I recognised that PAR and
Indigenist thought reinforced my purpose as a CDP and validated
my use by participants as a generic tool.

So as to create a defined structure to position myself in an
Indigenous research project, I developed what I termed a
Social Framework, a list of 'methods of interaction' outlining what
participants and I would and would not do so as to enact the
above-outlined theory and prior professional learning. I had not
seen this done before, but knew that by adhering to the stated
methods, I would create the base necessary to analyse my practice
and understand whether the personal work theory implemented
enabled participants and I to achieve our intended aims. As an
example of the evolution of one's living theory, the results from
this analysis would then feed into the ongoing development of my
living theory for future practice as a CDP.

In developing the Social Framework, it is noted that the methods
are not only the result of the theoretical learning gained through

the CDU degree, but also the many conversations, readings, actions, outcomes, challenges, journeys and projects experienced in other places through other means up until this point. Based on this combination of learning, and using the living theory-style question 'Who should undertake this task, you or me?', the below methods were concluded to guide the interaction of both participants and I as we engaged together in an Indigenous research project.

SOCIAL FRAMEWORK

METHODS OF INTERACTION OF PARTICIPANTS:
Method 1 To identify the community development / research project.
Method 2 To request the participation of the community development practitioner (CDP).
Method 3 To be at the centre of the project.
Method 4 To design and implement the methods of data collection.
Method 5 To analyse the data.
Method 6 To control and implement how knowledge is used.

MY METHODS OF INTERACTION AS A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONER:
Method 7 To exclude myself from participants' decision-making.
Method 8 To use my skills as a tool for participants' advancement.
Method 9 To be a listener as opposed to a talker.
Method 10 To advocate for participants' right to access creative, developmental spaces.
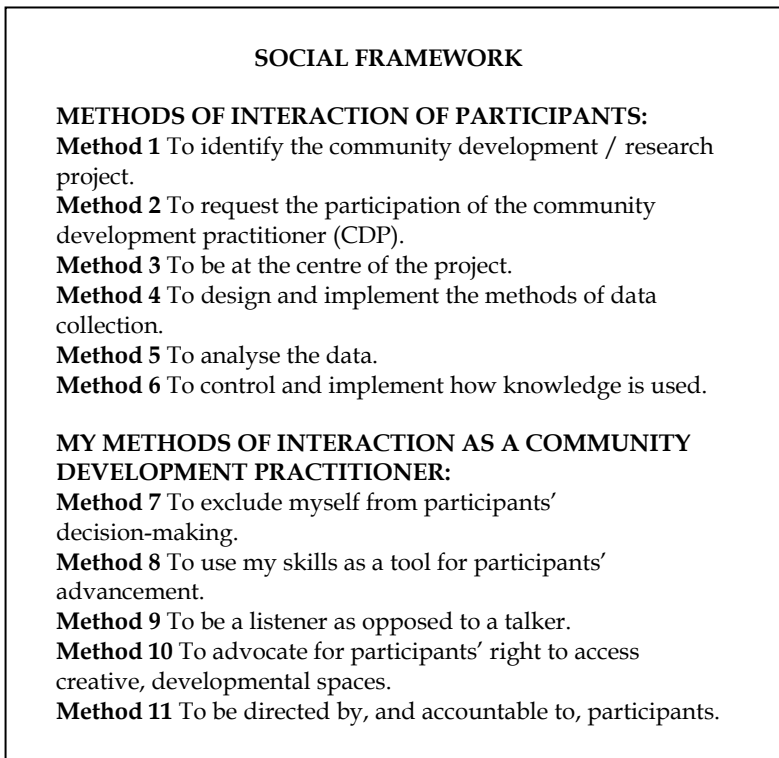**Method 11** To be directed by, and accountable to, participants.

Figure 1: Social Framework reflecting my living theory and educational influences for my participation in an Indigenous research project.

It is reiterated at this point that the above Social Framework is a reflection of my own experience and learning. Although some people may identify with some or all of the methods of interaction as part of their own practice, the aim of the thesis was not to provide a strict guide of interaction for all CDPs in all places, as this would undermine the constructivist interpretive nature of the living theory approach to learning. Contrastingly, in using the thesis to show the evolution of my own thought and practice, my aim was to portray an example of living theory to legitimise each CDP's unique learning and experience in the development of their own Social Framework.

In an effort to guide the reader to see how the Social Framework was applied and tested, whilst also remaining accountable to the methods of interaction to enhance the integrity of the analysis, I am explicit in showing when each of the methods of interaction was used. As will be seen, I do this by naming the method in brackets after each action or decision to which it pertains.

Practice

The project I participated in was with a group of Traditional Aboriginal Owners (TAOs) who had the desire to become more involved in the Northern Territory (NT) Crocodile Industry. At a workshop in 2009, the Northern Territory Government (NTG) requested that two of the ten TAOs present be elected to represent the interests of all Territory TAOs in the ongoing development of the *Northern Territory Farmed Saltwater Crocodile Industry Strategy* (RMCG Consultants, 2009), referred to hereafter as the *Strategy*. At this point, the TAOs present deferred from the room and formed the Northern Territory Traditional Aboriginal Owners Crocodile Management Board (NTTAOCMB or Board). It was explained later by one of the TAOs, Dr Payi Linda Ford, that the impetus for this was that two TAOs cannot represent the diversity of country, culture and interests of all TAOs as they pertain to saltwater

crocodiles in the NT. The NTTAOCMB was therefore formed by TAOs to give *any* TAO the opportunity to have a voice in discussions about saltwater crocodiles (Method 1).

One of the Board's first identified tasks was to submit feedback to the NTG's (2009) draft *Management Program for the Saltwater Crocodile in the Northern Territory of Australia, 2009-2014*, referred to hereafter as the *Program.* This document aims to address 'the balance that is required between conservation goals, sustainable harvest, growing industry and maintaining public safety' (p. 4). Different to the *Strategy*, the *Program* has an emphasis on the science of maintaining a healthy crocodile population, setting the boundaries within which the commercial goals of the *Strategy* take place.

In response to the draft *Program*, the Board submitted two documents suggesting ten areas for the participation of the NTTAOCMB and/or Aboriginal people in the NT Crocodile Industry. These included:

1) Participation in the allocation of egg collection permits (mentioned twice).
2) Support with guiding other TAOs as to compliance regulations within the NT Crocodile Industry (mentioned twice).
3) Support for research focusing on the collection and importance of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge (mentioned twice).
4) TAOs to educate visitors to their country about crocodiles.
5) Involvement of TAOs in negotiations on compensation for problem crocodile removal (mentioned twice).

6) Direct involvement of the NTTAOCMB in the development of the *Strategy* and *Program* (mentioned twice).
7) Assistance by TAOs in the development of public awareness campaigns.
8) Close monitoring of egg collection practices to ensure transparency.
9) Negotiation of a Territory-wide benchmark price for eggs.
10) Education and training of TAOs in value adding such as incubation and sale of hatchlings to farms.

On review of this information and the developmental processes experienced by the Board up until this point, it could be seen that the NTTAOCMB had many ideas about how to further engage Aboriginal people in the NT Crocodile Industry (Methods 1 & 3). In this sense, Board members were observed to be people who already owned and would remain at the centre of their research (Method 3), would make their own decisions (Method 7), and would allow me to interact as a listener as opposed to talker (Method 9). As a result, I saw that I would be able to engage in a way that reflected the Social Framework and accepted the Board's offer (Method 2) to support with their developmental processes (Method 8), a collaboration which was solidified on receiving a Letter of Support from the Board stating that

> [t]he Board expects Michael Beattie, in his role as honours candidate, to work with Board members to identify the risks associated with the processes, development and existence of the NTTAOCMB in the Northern Territory Crocodile Industry. At all times the candidate's research progress will be guided by the Board (Method 11).

In particular, my role became to organise a workshop whereby TAOs could come together to analyse risks and draw conclusions

for decisions pertaining to the Board's development (Methods 3, 4, 5 & 10). Understanding this as TAOs' chosen method for the NTTAOCMB to collectively analyse data (Methods 4 & 5), my role would be to create a space that reflected TAOs' needs, visions and desires (Methods 10 & 11). In doing this, pre-workshop interview topics were developed so as to: 1) gain an understanding of each TAO's relationship with saltwater crocodiles on country; 2) understand the importance of the NTTAOCMB for each person; 3) know what members saw as the Board's functions; 4) gauge how each person wanted the Board to move forward; and 5) know the risks that each person perceived for the Board's development. Collecting and compiling this information to structure the workshop, I positioned myself in a way that I was directed by, and accountable to, project participants (Methods 9 & 11).

In collecting TAO responses to the interview topics, attempts were made through different means to connect with each of the ten TAOs that formed the Board in March 2009 (Methods 3 & 11). Of the ten TAOs, it was Board Chairperson Jida Gulpilil, Ramingining; Board Secretary Dr Payi Linda Ford, Wagait Land Trust; and Board Member David Kenyon, Wairuk Community, Humpty Doo, who were the principle informants.
TAO Margaret Daiyi, Wagait Land Trust, also became a key participant in these processes. The information compiled from these conversations enabled me to begin to structure a workshop that reflected TAO thought on potential functions, perceived risks, and ways to establish a strong and legal foundation for future aspirations (Methods 3, 8, 9 & 11).

During preliminary discussions with the Northern Territory Government (NTG) to access workshop funding, the Board was told that it would need to request a Letter of Acknowledgement from the Northern Land Council (NLC). This was due to potential functions of the Board being seen to compete with the NLC, and the inability of the NTG to provide support without this being made transparent. At the request of the Board, I organised a

meeting with the NLC for 27 August 2009 so that the Board could ask for the letter (Methods 8 & 11). Present at this meeting were NLC representatives, Board Secretary Dr Ford, and I. My role at this meeting was to be present, listen and take notes (Methods 8 & 9). Dr Ford did the talking, explaining the development of the NTTAOCMB thus far and the future intent of the group (Methods 3 & 4).

In response, the NLC explained that under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) 1976 Act (ALRA), the NLC has a 'statutory obligation' to represent TAOs in matters pertaining to land use. This comment was made in specific reference to Aim 2 of the Workshop Outline, 'to discuss creating a legal entity where Board Members can formally represent TAOs involved in the Crocodile Industry'. At this stage of the meeting, the NLC inquired about the potential of presenting at the workshop on Land Council responsibilities, and whether TAOs representative of the NLC would be able to participate. Dr Ford responded that this would be fine. In terms of the Letter of Acknowledgement, it was said that this would need to be approved by the NLC's CEO (Beattie, pers. comm., *Meeting*, 27/08/09).

On 20 October 2009, the Board received the Letter of Acknowledgement signed by the then NLC CEO Kim Hill. The letter stated that

> [a]s you would appreciate, the Northern Land Council is bound to support the views and aspirations of all of its Traditional Owners within its region.
>
> Within this constituency, Traditional Owners have very diverse views on crocodiles, from those for whom the crocodile is a totem and sacred animal, to those who are keen to get involved in all manner of industry with crocodiles.
>
> Notwithstanding this, the Northern Land Council is pleased to support your organisation's proposal to conduct

a workshop on crocodile management (Northern Land Council, pers. comm., 20/10/09).

On receiving this letter, the Board had the documentation necessary to proceed in its attempt to access workshop funding from the NTG. At the Board's request, I organised a meeting to discuss this support with the then Minister for Natural Resources, Karl Hampton (Methods 8 & 11). This meeting took place on 11 November 2009 and included the attendance of the Minister, Board Secretary Dr Ford, Board Member David Kenyon, TAO Margaret Daiyi, the then Minister's Adviser Andrew Buick, and I.

Dr Ford explained that for the Board to continue to represent TAOs' diversity of country and culture, it would be necessary to access funding to overcome geographical and communication barriers. It was then said that if funding could be obtained for the workshop, attendees would have the opportunity to discuss options for the Board's incorporation, solidify its potential functions, and analyse risks (Method 3 & 9). After requesting that the Board use the workshop to discuss where they see themselves fitting in with the Minister, the Land Councils and the then Department of Natural Resources, Environment The Arts and Sport (NRETAS), and confirming that the NLC would be included in the workshop agenda, Minister Hampton affirmed his support for the workshop and directed the Board to speak about grant options with the Indigenous Business Development Program. Funding was approved in March 2010.

For the purpose of the workshop, which took place on 10 and 11 April 2010, an external facilitator and a lawyer were engaged for the entire time to assist TAOs with discussions identified by TAOs. The facilitator, Kate Andrews, had a background in facilitating natural resource management projects with TAOs in other places. The lawyer, James Matthews, had experience in incorporation of Indigenous organisations in the Northern Territory.

In framing her position in the workshop, Kate stated the following, showing her alignment with the Social Framework.

> [y]ou give me all of that feedback because I'm here to do this for you guys, I'm not here to do it for me (NTTAOCMB, pers. comm., *Workshop Footage No. 1*, 10/04/10, 26min 55sec) (Methods 3, 8, 9 & 11).

> This is about you achieving your goals, so if there's anything that's in the way or anything that's been left out, we'll change it (NTTAOCMB, pers. comm., *Workshop Footage No. 1*, 10/04/10, 48min 45sec) (Methods 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 & 11).

As well as those TAOs already mentioned, other TAO participation at the workshop included Calvin Deveraux, Wagait Land Trust; Barney Narjic, Wudupuli, Wadeye; Djawa Yunupingu, Gumatj Corporation, Nhulunbuy; and Joe Browne, Larrakia Nation. Three guest presenters from the NTG and three interested external parties also participated by providing information for discussion by TAOs (Method 5). The NLC did not send a representative.

Over the two days, there were many robust discussions to come to consensus on the group's name, structure, purpose, functions, values, legislation under which to become incorporated, membership and media policy. During the discussion on the group's purpose and functions, TAOs reflected on their individual and shared desires and motivations. One person, for example, said that the group should let TAOs on country know about information pertaining to crocodile management. Another said the group should be a one-stop-shop for the provision of information to feed into crocodile-related policy, while another said that that the Board should provide the Minister with a united TAO voice and perspective. There was also discussion around the role of the Board in advocating for training of Aboriginal people so as to take

a more central role in the crocodile industry. In assuming these functions, however, it was observed that the current system of saltwater crocodile management excludes Aboriginal voice and knowledge. It was questioned, for example, why independent scientists are necessary to verify the knowledge that Aboriginal people have known for thousands of years, and why there is no recognition of TAOs' crocodile ownership when 'problem' crocodiles are removed from Aboriginal land (NTTAOCMB, *Workshop Footage No. 2*, 10/04/10) (Methods 3, 5, 6, 7 & 9).

Further analysing their purpose, the group asked themselves why they were making this commitment to come together for the workshop, to which Dr Ford made the following comment.

> Because we're sick to death of being marginalised and pushed aside and put in a box. We don't want to be silenced anymore, we want to have a voice, we want to have our say (NTTAOCMB, *Workshop Footage No. 2*, 10/04/10, 00hr 50min 30sec) (Methods 1 & 3).

Developing on this sentiment, and in an effort to solidify the group's purpose, TAOs workshopped ideas for a 'one-liner' that would tell people their purpose. In doing this, participants broke into two groups to write what they perceived to be the purpose of the Board. This information was then presented back to the entire group, before being workshopped to come to a final consensus on one overarching statement (NTTAOCMB, Workshop Footage No. 3 & 6, 10/04/10) (Methods 3, 5, 6, 7 & 9). The final purpose reads as follows:

> To secure a better future for our communities and country by establishing an alliance for self-determination and economic development, recognising spiritual affiliation, through sustainable management of crocodiles for current and future generations (Method 3).

Documentation of other discussions and processes that took place in the workshop can be found in the full thesis.

Analysis

As stated in the theoretical discussion at the beginning of this article, the purpose of this research was to use a living theory approach to learning to analyse and develop my own practice. By removing myself from the task of interpreting TAOs and their processes, and focussing the research on whether my positioning supported participants and I to achieve our intended goals, my aim was to extricate myself from contributing to the marginalising research practices which have historically propagated Indigenous disempowerment. As such, detailed analysis of *how* TAOs participated to achieve their goals has been left to TAOs. Before moving forward with this discussion, however, it is noted that as a result of the workshop, the Board changed its name to the Traditional Owner Crocodile Management Association (TOCMA or Crocodile Country).

Looking at whether Crocodile Country achieved its intended aims whilst using my participation, it is claimed that it did. In the complete thesis, it is contended that project outputs including consensus on the group's purpose, functions, values, a draft constitution for the group's incorporation, and an activity plan, are all evidence that TAOs achieved their aim of creating the foundations necessary to move forward in achieving their aspirations. Although analysis of TAOs' methods to achieve this aim is not part of this work, it will be seen now that reflection on outcomes stemming from TAO processes *is* used to assess whether my professional aims were achieved.

In the first instance, it is noted that there are various examples of where my participation did support TAOs' access to an enhanced state of autonomy and agency. This is not to say that TOCMA could not have achieved these outcomes without my participation,

but to recognise that the way I positioned myself during the project helped to enable these outcomes. Elaborating on these sentiments, it is important to ask whether, for example, the same sense of autonomy and agency would have been achieved if I had been a talker instead of a listener, if I had taken over the centre of the project from TAOs, or if I had analysed data on behalf of participants. Reflecting in this way, it is recognised that a CDP chooses their methods of interaction, and that these choices directly influence the project outcomes experienced by participants. As such, the project outcomes experienced by TAOs can be seen as an indicator of whether the Social Framework implemented in the project was successful in guiding me to achieve my intended aims.

One example of TOCMA's experience of agency and autonomy was when I was asked by TAOs to organise the NLC meeting. As noted above, TOCMA was told during this meeting that it is the NLC's 'statutory obligation' to represent TAOs in matters pertaining to Aboriginal people, suggesting that it would be impossible to achieve the group's goal to 'formally represent TAOs involved in the NT Crocodile Industry'. Believing that they had been misinformed, TAOs expressed their agency when they asked that I seek legal advice from one of their contacts, lawyer James Matthews, who forwarded the following information.

> There is no restriction on TAOs forming an incorporated entity with the purpose of ensuring that the wishes and opinions of Traditional Owner groups are represented in relation to the development of strategies, programs and policies in relation to the Crocodile Industry. The TAOs can undertake these actions without approval or endorsement by the NLC.
>
> If the TAOs wish to obtain statutory recognition for performing these roles and functions under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act (ALRA) 1976*, there are two mechanisms for TAOs to perform functions from the Land Council. The first involves appointment to a committee of

the Land Council (see Sections 29 (2) and 29A of ALRA). The second is by incorporation and registration under the *Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act (Cth) 2006* (Section 28 (2) of ALRA), and then applying to the NLC for a delegation of powers under Section 28A (James Matthews Legal, pers. comm., *Email*, 19/10/09 & 28/10/11).

As a result of TOCMA's direction, I obtained information which reaffirmed TAOs' agency and ability to create an autonomous entity within the NT Crocodile Industry. In particular, it is interesting to note that after receiving the above information, TOCMA decided to continue on its path to become incorporated and not to become a sub-standing committee of the NLC, as this would only have given them an advisory status, undermining their potential autonomy.

TAOs' responses to a post-workshop questionnaire also confirm that the living theory incorporated into the development and running of the workshop supported Crocodile Country's access to an enhanced state of autonomy and agency. In terms of content, for example, one TAO noted that it was TAOs who 'controlled the information that went towards the development' of the workshop. Another observed that 'the purpose of the meeting allowed the discussions to incorporate the TAOs' thinking', whilst another noted that 'participants expressed genuine concerns and problem solving (solutions)'. In addition to these comments, the six responding TAOs also noted that they felt comfortable in the workshop space to talk openly about what they were thinking. In particular, they wrote that contributing factors to this comfort were the 'physical location of the venue', the 'layout of the meeting room', and the workshop facilitator. Responses to the questionnaire show that participants felt ownership over the workshop agenda, the information generated, and the structure of the space, leading one to conclude that they also experienced a greater sense of autonomy and agency.

In observing these successes, it is noted also that the Social Framework was found to have limitations in achieving my intended aims. For example, it was felt during practice that there was an inherent conflict between Method 6, for participants to implement their own conclusions, and Method 8, for the skills of the CDP to be used as a tool for participants' advancement. Although it was seen that my actions were guided by the conclusions of TAOs, it was also noted that due to varying barriers to TAO participation, there were times when I worked by myself. In this sense, there was sometimes a dependence on my participation to move the project forward, undermining the complete autonomy of the group. As a result, the Social Framework for my future practice has since evolved to be more explicit in the importance of collaboration when implementing conclusions and when using my skills to advance the project.

Another example of how my living theory changed because of this experience stems from an observation that it would have been beneficial to have suggested that the group discuss how they were going to fill my role post-workshop. In an effort to adhere to Method 9, however, and be a listener as opposed to a talker, I generally observed so as not to impose external thoughts and ensure that the project remained a genuine product of TAOs. As a result, however, discussion of how my role would be filled post-workshop did not happen, and measures were not put in place to fill the gaps created by my departure. In turn, the method which insisted that I listen as opposed to talk has been changed to recognise that my role should be active in providing relevant information for discussion by participants. A final evolved Social Framework to begin future practice as a CDP can be found at the end of the complete thesis.

In constant reflection of questions such as 'Who should undertake this task, you or me?', this research has shown that the value of living theory action research for a CDP lies not in the conclusion of a universal truth that is applicable in all scenarios, but in the

importance of a CDP developing their own living theory reflective of their educational influences and current context. In a field as complex as community development and social research, it is this ongoing reflection and understanding of oneself, one's educational influences, and one's methods of interaction that is inherent to good practice outcomes.

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Valuing student and community voices in the university: Action Research as a Framework for Community Service-learning

Erin O'Connor, Judith Smith, Phil Crane, Dean Brough, Natasha Shaw, Jill Franz & Ingrid Larkin

Abstract

The Community Service-learning Lab (the Lab) was initiated as a university-wide service-learning experience at an Australian university. The Lab engages students, academics, and key community organisations in interdisciplinary action research projects to support student learning and to explore complex and ongoing problems nominated by the community partners. The current study uses feedback from the first offering of the Lab and focuses on exploring student experiences of the service learning project using an action research framework. Student reflections on this experience have revealed some positive outcomes of the Lab such as an appreciation for positive and strengths-based change. These outcomes are corroborated by collected reflections from community partners and academics. The students also identified challenges balancing the requirements for assessment and their goals to serve the community partner's needs. This feedback has provided vital information for the academic team, highlighting the difficulties in balancing the agenda of the academic framework and the desire to give students authentic experiences.

Introduction

The Community Service-learning Lab (Lab) is a university-wide service-learning (SL) initiative at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia. Community partners, connected to the Lab, invite students to inquire into real and complex issues facing their communities. To acknowledge the complexity of the issues facing our communities, an interdisciplinary approach, grounded in a Participatory Action Research framework (PAR) has been developed. In the spirit of collaborative inquiry the community partners couch their issues as broad framing questions rather than directives for outcomes. For example: instead of "make a website" a project brief would read "How can we best communicate with the community?" The projects are purposefully designed to allow for student and community input into the project focus, process and outcomes. This more open approach to projects originated from student advice provided in the stakeholder roundtable discussions, which informed the design of the Lab's curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Each semester student teams contribute a component of an ongoing inquiry. At the end of the semester the student groups reflect on their processes and outcomes and identify areas for future investigation by student teams.

The current paper presents a case study based on one of the projects. The study focuses on student Lab reflections but also incorporates some community and academic input. The focus of the case study is to explore the student experience of the Lab and how students respond to the use of action research within a SL experience.

Action Research and Service-learning

Participatory action research starts 'where people are at' and develops through dialogue, as a group of people trial, evaluate and improve strategies aimed at improving the situation of people in some respect. Harking back to the concept of 'unfreezing' (Lewin 1946) community partners nominate an issue of challenge that is important to themselves and which they would like a project to focus on.

> *A difference is noticed, an ideal is not met, a loss of quality, a foreshadowed change of direction, or perhaps the need for innovation.* (Goff et. al 1998: 65, in Crane and Richardson 2000: 1.7)

Consistent with Bradbury and Reason (2008), the character of PAR has an emergent developmental form, as practical and knowledge producing. The critical pedagogy underpinnings of PAR are manifested as an explicit invitation to students to explore and develop their understandings at the local level about disadvantage and privilege, whilst investigating a particular challenge the agency faced.

The PAR process is presented as cyclical yet dynamic, consisting of interrelated moments of initial observation, reflection and planning - followed by action, observation, reflection and sharing at student, individual project and Lab wide levels. PAR has steadily grown in popularity as a tool for evaluation of education at all levels and across disciplines including tertiary education for psychology students (Lizzio & Wilson 2012), education students (Bloomfield, Taylor, & Maxwell 2004), and as a model to examine academics teaching (Ferguson 2012; Schratz 1992).

In the Lab, students conduct action research within a SL context (while the learning design is evaluated by academic staff through an additional action research project). Service-learning has been described as "the various pedagogies that link community service and academic study so that each strengthens the other. The basic

theory of SL is Dewey's: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning" (Ehrlich 1996: xi). Service-learning aims to encourage students to examine social justice issues such as privilege and disadvantage. While reviews of SL have highlighted the difficulties in empirically measuring impact, there is initial evidence that SL contributes to personally and professionally impactful learning (Felten & Clayton 2011). Service learning addresses many of the key principles of good practice recommended in a current Australian report on work-integrated learning, but particularly relates to the principle of reciprocity or "mutual benefit"(Orrell 2011: 20). It is this focus on reciprocity and the significant emphasis on social justice and citizenship that make SL an exemplary match for PAR.

The combination of PAR and SL is not new and has been reported in a number of cases. For example, models that incorporate the two have been formally proposed in the literature (e.g., Suarex-Balcazar, Harper, and Lewis 2005). Practical examples of on-campus simulated action research that incorporates similar values as SL have also shown to enhance professional skills (Lizzio & Wilson 2012). Another outcome from these trials is an increase in the quality of professional reflection (Bloomfield, Taylor, & Maxwell 2004).

While past research has explored how the models progress civic learning (e.g., Parker-Gwin & Mabry 1998), few studies have investigated student reactions to the models themselves. One notable exception found that these approaches also result in deeper learning than traditional approaches, but did not investigate the student uptake of the values and principles of action research values (Lizzio & Wilson 2012). This paper will present a single project from the Lab as a case study. The focus of the case study will be to explore the following questions using student reflections and input from the community partner and academic staff:

1. Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention?)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?
2. What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
3. What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

The Lab – An overview

The Lab curriculum has been shared by a number of SL units across the University and focuses on adding value to the established discipline-based curriculum. The Lab aims to:

- Identify and apply engagement strategies which support students as emerging professionals to work sensitively and appropriately with diverse communities and individuals
- Build awareness of the complexity of issues associated with privilege, disadvantage, and social injustice as these issues pertain to questions being explored with community partners
- Developing approaches to inquiry that value diverse perspectives and lead to mutually beneficial outcomes for stakeholders
- Exploring interdisciplinary ways of working when investigating real and complex issues facing communities

Disciplines involved in the Lab include Law, Justice, Business, Psychology, Social Work, Creative
Industries and Design disciplines such as Fashion, Interior Design and Interactive Design. Academics collaborate with community partners in the development of the shared curriculum. Academics

and community partners co-facilitate shared SL events which engaged all student teams. Curriculum and assessment resources are also shared across units and projects. Additionally each project employs a range of specific strategies relevant to the nature of the student group and project focus. A community liaison role has been created in the University's Learning and Teaching Unit to facilitate project connections between community organisations and relevant discipline areas. This role is also responsible for promoting projects to students, managing applications and disseminating resources through community websites.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) was selected as the inquiry framework for the two levels at which the Lab operates. First, the Lab as a whole which investigated the big picture questions around how stakeholders work together at a strategic level to support SL and second, the process of collaboration and inquiry for individual projects (Crane, Smith & Shaw 2011). The principles of collaboration and reciprocity underpin both SL pedagogy and PAR. Both SL and PAR acknowledge that there are a range of stakeholders: students, organisations in the community, academia, university administration, and the community at large and that all parties have the potential to learn from, and contribute to the experience (Bringle, Clayton & Price 2009). PAR also supports an inquiry project-based approach to SL. The pedagogy that emerged from the interdisciplinary curriculum team was informed not only by PAR but also discipline-based inquiry approaches such as design thinking.

The Lab can be understood as a form of 'networked systemic inquiry' (Burns 2007: 19) into university-community SL comprised of multiple action inquiries. As Burns (2007) suggests, good systemic practice requires a strong network of group-based inquiries which in turn require reflective practice at the individual level. The Lab adopts a method of action researching that involves multiple layers of stakeholders working on different but interlinked aspects of the projects. The Lab-wide mechanism is a project

reference group comprised of project staff, the community partners, each Faculty, the university's equity unit, and advisors on SL and action research. The Lab aims to adopt action research and SL values including being democratic, participatory and valuing reciprocity (Mills 2011). Reciprocity can be defined as *an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties* (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise 2008: 305). After community staff nominate their complex and ongoing problems, students are encouraged to nominate macro and micro questions to facilitate their work. The goals and outcomes are not specified by academic staff, but instead directed by the students and based discussions and collaboration with the community partner.

Regular communication between all stakeholders is integral to the Lab and different meetings and workshops are held at different points in the semester. Workshops for staff are delivered by community representatives and a PAR consultant addressing the key principles of the curriculum design, SL and action learning and action research. Students from the university community are invited to share their perspectives of the model during this development stage. A similar method of sharing concepts with a large group has been previously adopted by Trent (2012: 36). Academic staff are also provided with PAR research handbooks designed to facilitate the research and learning processes. Curriculum meetings focus on the projects that will be offered to students and the assessment (see Table 1). At these meetings, the academic staff in consultation with the community partners refine the learning and assessment focus.

At the beginning of each semester, introductory workshops for students on PAR and SL are co-facilitated by academics and community partners. Community partners are also involved in these workshops and deliver some of the workshop material. The project teams (community, students, and staff) complete a session about power and influence. During this time, the teams are able to discuss the roles and responsibilities of each team member and the

potential influence of power - this includes the power and privilege of each role. During semester, the staff supervising each of the projects are in regular contact with each other and their students. Across the Lab, the staff from different projects meet after the submission of assessment for moderation meetings. There are also agreed reflection and "checking-in" points for students, staff, and their community partner throughout the semester.

Table 1: The student assessment tasks

Assessment 1	Assessment 2	Assessment 3
Project proposal description	Reflective Blog or Journal	Presentation
Weight: 20%	Weight: 40%	Weight: 40%
Due: Week 5	Due: Throughout semester	Due: End of semester
i) An individual personal statement about their own key strengths and responsibilities and ii) a group plan identifying how the team will address the community partner's needs	Individual reflections using the 4R model to explore key experiences and personal outcomes	Group presentation to share the project outcomes and process with community partners and academic staff

At the end of each semester, students share the outcomes and process of their project to community partners, academics and peers. During these workshops, the student and community responses to the community projects are considered and the next stage of each project (leading from the student responses) is developed for next cohort of students. Feedback and evaluation is

gathered from all stakeholders though a variety of means including questionnaire, group feedback sessions, interviews and email to inform the development of the subsequent cycle of projects. In this way, after each semester, the cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and sharing continues into the new cycle of projects (see Figure 1). A rich variety of projects are conducted within the lab (see Table 2). This paper will focus on the outcomes of the first cycle of the Kyabra project.
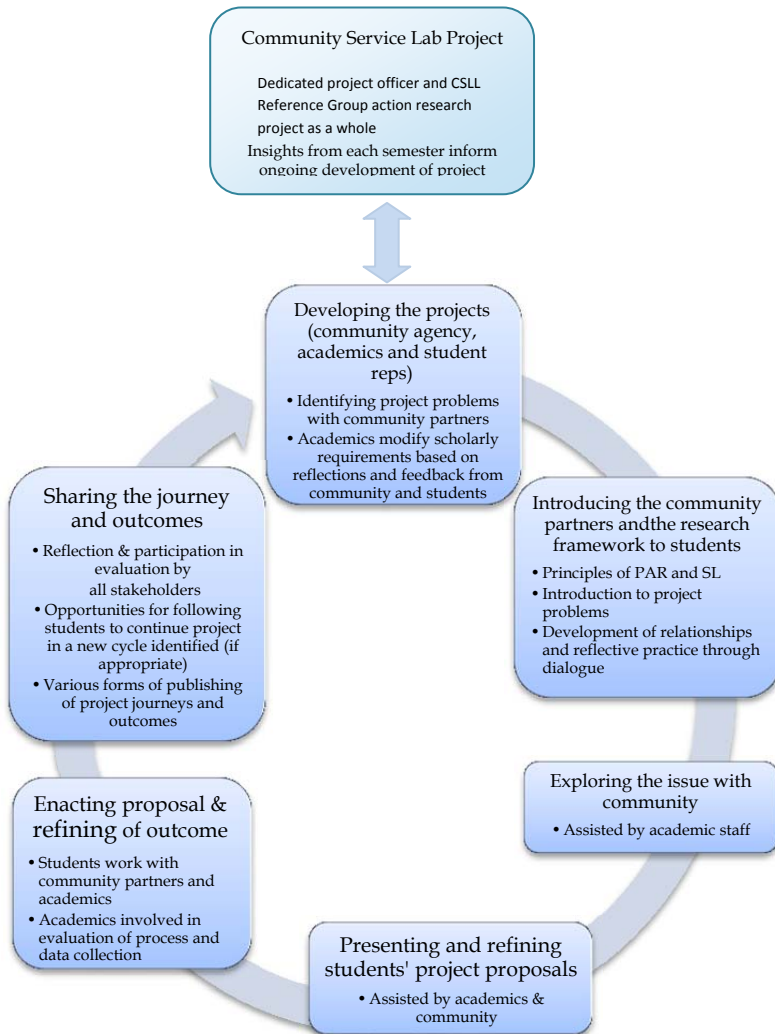
Figure 1: The CSLL Action Research System

Table 2: The Lab projects (first semester/cycle)

Organisation and role/function[1]	Framing questions	Students' discipline areas	Data collection and outcomes
Organisation with a range of services including housing, family, financial, refugee and disability support (1)	How can the organisation communicate with clarity to its stakeholders and service users around its identity and provide evidence of innovative practice?	Psychology Business Fashion Design Interior Design Creative Industries CI/Human Services	Conducted a survey into the identity of the organisation Researched other NFP organisations public interface (i.e Annual report) and made recommendations.
Organisation with a range of services including housing, family, financial, refugee and disability support (1)	How do you communicate complex legal information to people around their tenancy rights and responsibilities?	Law Film and TV	Researched relevant legislation and translated complex legal jargon into a script for a series of scenarios to be made into a DVD.
Holistic support for disabled adults (2)	How to support the support workers to complete their demanding and complex role	Psychology Education	Qualitative and quantitative research conducted with support workers including intense periods of participation in the organisation's service centres.

Organisation and role/function[1]	Framing questions	Students' discipline areas	Data collection and outcomes
Legal Service for migrants and refugees (3)	How will a recent high court decision affect clients of the service and how can we identify the clients who will benefit from this decision?	Law Law/CI	Analysis of client records to identify suitable candidates. Research and report on the implications of the High Court Decision
Social Justice and Advocacy Group of the Anglican Diocese (4)	How do you raise awareness of the importance of the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian Constitution?	Psychology Law Justice Studies	Surveyed the attitudes and opinions of a particular target audience around the issue. Reviewed recommendations from an expert panel and identified key themes to communicate to a wider audience.
Support service for prisoners and their families (5)	What can be done to improve the pathways for people serving life sentences?	Justice Studies	Extensive research into comparative penal systems which was incorporated into the organisations report to government.

[1] The numbers listed reflect the organisation ID

Case study

Kyabra, located in Brisbane, Australia, is a multi-service community-based organisation working with individuals and families to enhance community life. Core programs offered at Kyabra include disability support, foster and kinship care programs, housing support, community finance and recovery services, and other broader community programs. The centre staff endorse a person-centred and strength appreciative model in all approaches to their work.

Kyabra's complex and ongoing problem was one of identity. Kyabra staff wished to find creative solutions and deliver tangible outcomes to complex problems around the organisation's identity, including how they interface with stakeholders and how they evidence their practice.

Participants

Academics

The academic team included 7 staff from a range of study areas including Design, Creative Industries, Fashion, Business, Psychology. The team also had contact with the Lab Community Liaison Officer and a PAR consultant from human services. These staff had varying levels of previous experience with PAR models and completed the workshop training and regular meetings.

Students

Seven students were involved in the case study project. The participant identification numbers and broad discipline area are presented in Table 3 with information about multi-discipline double degrees and programs of study with one or two majors within the same discipline (e.g., two majors within the creative industries may include dance and drama or art and art history). These identification numbers are also reported alongside the quotes in the later sections of this paper.

Table 3: The student 'home' disciplines

Participant IDs	Disciplinary training (and cross-disciplinary studies)
1	Creative industries (two majors)
2	Multi discipline degree (creative industries and human services)
3	Business (single major)
4	Creative industries (two majors)
5	Design (two majors)
6	Design (with previous multi-discipline degree experience)
7	Psychology (single major)

Research methodology: Evaluation through case study

The project was approved by the institutional ethics board and, to help address ethical issues around unequal power roles in assessment, the students were given the opportunity to opt out of the research after grades were finalised and confirmed at the university level. The data collected as part of this project has come from a variety of sources. First, the students are encouraged to keep reflective journals and are required to submit up to five reflections for assessment purposes. These reflections were guided by the 4R model (adapted from the 5R model; Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester 2002). The 4R model (Ryan 2011: 8), guides students through four basic steps to assist in the composition of written reflections. Students are first encouraged to *report* all details of the experience or event, then *relate* this experience to their own personal context by comparing and contrasting the current experience to other aspects in their life such as past events. *Reasoning* involves interconnecting

the reflection to models, theories, professional ethics, or other relevant frameworks, and *reconstructing* involves a summary of the learnings that can be gained from this reflection and planning for the future. The model was adopted across the university prior to the development of the Lab and has been used by a number of academic staff in their previous teaching. Training was provided to students about this style of professional reflection. The focus in this paper will be to explore how action research has informed student experiences and learning in the first offering of this class. A small number of staff and community responses to these reflections have also been incorporated.

As the Lab was being trialled for the first time, the students were encouraged to reflect on any experiences, insights or themes they decided were suitable for reflection. This also allowed analysis to move beyond the development of 'themes' which simply reflect interview prompts (see Bazeley, 2009 p. 9). Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the teams involved in this subject, and of this case study team in particular, it was considered important to determine if different disciplines experienced aspects of the subject in different ways. As discussed by Bazeley (2009: 10), this also assisted in analysis searching for discrepancies or similarities between the experiences reported by students coming from different disciplines.

Method of analysis

Coding consistency checks were undertaken by an academic not familiar with the student reflections or the project but involved in similar methods of teaching (see Thomas 2006: 7). Further, as the analysis was largely undertaken by one of the authors, the co-authors were provided with the coding several times during the analysis phase for parallel checks. The consistency coder was provided with eight pages of sample student reflections, containing reflections from all students, and the identified themes. The coder was also given a rationale of the research and was asked to use the

codes provided and identify material from the reflections that matched these codes. The coder was also invited to nominate new codes.

The consistency coding was evaluated for points of agreement, disagreement (where the coders both identified a theme but disagreed) and coding by either coder that did not correspond with text that was coded by the other coder. Overall, the coders agreed 74% of the time. There were 4 points of disagreement. The most common disagreement in coding was between multi-disciplinary learning and professional growth, accounting for all but one disagreement. This indicated that there was some further analysis required to explore how students saw learning to work within a multidisciplinary team. This analysis is reflected in the outcomes of analysis presented below.

Using Mill's (2001: 126) method of qualitative data analysis, the reflections were interrogated for any underlying common themes and any particular points of diversion between student experiences. We declare here that this was not an open unstructured analysis searching for purely emergent themes but of particular interest were the students' responses to the PAR and SL frameworks and what they believed they gained professionally from this experience. No a priori codes were nominated; instead, the analysis was conducted using these questions as listed in the introduction:

> Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?

> What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
> What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the

reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

Results

The analysis of the reflections resulted in four super-ordinate themes: congruence with PAR and SL values, incongruence with PAR values, team work, learning and the education environment. Each of these themes and the underlying sub-themes are discussed in the following section.

Congruence with PAR and SL values

The super-ordinante theme "congruence with PAR and SL values" explored the values and principles of PAR and SL that were reflected in the students' writing. These values were discussed by almost all of the students, indicating that the frameworks for the project had been reasonably well adopted by the students.

Valuing organisation's involvement. The theme valuing the organisation's involvement related to the students' acknowledgement of the role that the community organisation could play in their project. Some students commented about the value of the organisation's contributions and how they would involve the organisation in the development of outcomes. These comments also recognised a shift from viewing the organisation as passive participants or worse, 'subjects' as those to be 'studied' instead to powerful and valued co-collaborators.

> By acknowledging different clients' needs and how we could be unintentionally discriminating we may define a more inclusive "identity". For example, excluding clients' perceptions on a "home" could be unintentionally discriminating and lead to an incorrect interface that represents Kyabra. But also excluding Kyabra staff and their definitions on identity can be oppressive too. – 2

> PAR has encouraged the team to exercise lateral thinking and develop a dialogue with Kyabra and relevant stakeholders, where all parties subsequently adopted a participatory role and engaged in the fulfilling act of collaboration - 6

> I feel through this stage of the project I have gained a new appreciation for the importance of my skills within this project when trying to determine the interests of the stakeholders. – 7

The students were also eager to involve stakeholders from the community organisation and developed a survey to assist the team in identifying areas of need. This effort was the student's method of engaging stakeholders; however, all analysis was done within the team and so this survey tool could be seen as a step towards PAR, rather than a motion to fully embrace the model.

> To do this the team has decided to survey as many stakeholders as we can in order to finalise the direction of the project. Furthermore the analysis of this information needs to be done as quickly as possible so that the other team members are able to base their arguments for the direction of this project on the wants and needs of at least some of Kyabra's stakeholders. - 7

Valuing reciprocity. The value of reciprocity and partnership was also reflected in some student comments. Interestingly, reciprocity was mentioned in the reflections of students who had more than one discipline represented in their degree structures. These students recognised that the project was being conducted for mutual learning and benefit. These students positioned the organisation as a 'teacher' who had valuable knowledge and insights to share.

> I am excited to be involved in the project, and pleased to be given the opportunity to work alongside a community partner. I think that it is of great value to gain experience by talking to an organisation, - 1

> I refer now to a goal set out in my week 5 personal plan, "It is hoped that this collaborative engagement with community service partner Kyabra, will be reciprocal in nature, in that it will provide the team with opportunities to engage with a multidisciplinary team and apply learnt knowledge and skills in a real-world setting whilst ultimately benefiting the partner organization and its stakeholders". - 6

Endorsing the strength-based approach. Some students also made statements indicating an endorsement of the strength-based approach. These students, largely informed by the community organisation who also works from a strength-based framework, indicated a willingness to explore the strengths of staff and clients. They also observed this approach in the host organisation. The students most commonly citing this approach in their reflections were each either working towards or had previously enrolled in double degrees. The possible significance is that double degree students maybe more accustomed to valuing two different frameworks (or disciplines) at the same time and seeing the strengths of two different approaches.

> By using client self-determination and strengths, staff engage with clients to work collaboratively to achieve change. – 2

> I was also really excited to hear David talk about strengths perspective. Strengths perspective acknowledges that everyone has strengths. Given the right support and resources clients are the experts in their own situations and can create positive change

(McCashen, 2005: 149). We as a team and the Kyabra team want to create a positive change by using the resources, organisation and creative strengths Kyabra possesses. – 6

Role within a cyclical model. Approximately half of the students commented on the cyclical model of PAR. One student in particular discussed these cycles with a clear vision to improving the academic process of the subject.

> I think we all wanted an outcome from this that would not only affect future students but also affect our group in the immediate future. It is also satisfying to know that our feedback will impact the structure of the unit for future students. – 5

Another student clearly discussed the cycles in terms of action and reflection to support the community partner.

> I understand future collaborative work between QUT and Kyabra will extend this goal beyond the current scope of work, however I feel confident that the current semester's collaborative efforts have uniquely positioned QUT and the Kyabra community to continue to build relational ties and solve complex community based problems. – 6

> The adopted community service based learning approach has enabled the multidisciplinary team to collaborate with Kyabra through a process of engagement, application and reflection. I believe this approach has been successful for both Kyabra and the student team due to its cyclical nature, whereby changes in project direction were easily accommodated and integrated into the working project process. - 6

Working towards action and change. Students also seemed to grasp the value of working with a PAR methodology for positive change and life enhancing results for the community members. They also saw PAR as a model that would emancipate students and encourage leadership qualities.

> Change, is ultimately what this project is striving for. A positive change which still encompasses Kyabra's mission and reflects their identity. - 1

> The team's work with Kyabra is a step forward in defending the notion of community and empowering students, our potential leaders of the future, to implant the seed of change. – 6

Incongruence with PAR and SL values

The student reflections also contained some conceptualisations of the project that implied PAR or SL incongruent thinking. While these comments were subtle and not necessarily representative of the students' overall intentions for the project, the reflections indicate how difficult it is to adopt a PAR framework when coming from disciplines less involved in the PAR tradition. Overall, these comments came from students from the Creative Industries and Business faculties. Given the nature of these disciplines, it is possible that these students brought in a conceptualisation of "client" and " delivery of product" partnerships and it may have, understandably, taken more effort for these students to move to the collaborative framework of PAR and SL.

Delivery of a product rather than collaborative creation. In these comments, students conceptualised the project as a series of goals to be achieved by the student team and a product to be 'delivered' to or 'solved' for the organisation, rather than something to be collaboratively worked through with the organisation or its stakeholders.

Maybe I was lead to believe or foolishly thought that we would have finished these massive projects for Kyabra, and have presented and almost solved their identity crisis. – 4

I think it is important for any business to have a reception that is welcoming to the client. - 1

Student directed goals rather than Kyabra directed goals. Some students also used their own goals as the frame for the project and prioritised goals derived from their own experiences of the organisation, rather than working with the stakeholders to uncover goals.

After a lot of discussion it came down to what we wanted to get out of this project, not only for ourselves, but for Kyabra. – 4

We agreed to focus more on the aspects of Kyabra's Identity, given that after visiting the site, our group had identified this as being an opportunity for a project direction. – 3

It sort of felt as though Kyabra had no room, which is certainly not the case. I definitely think this could be improved upon. Aesthetic is lacking within the office space and also needs to be addressed. - 1

Teamwork

The superordinate theme of teamwork was strongly linked to student growth and development. Students discussed the roles that naturally emerged and that were later negotiated against the tasks and goals of the team. In many cases, the students were supportive of the negotiated roles; however some found that this added even more confusion regarding their personal contribution and purpose.

The reflections also included students' comments about the benefits and challenges of multidisciplinary work. This aspect of the team received significant attention from the students and most reported positive experiences. Some added that there were additional challenges or questions that arose because of the multidisciplinary nature of the projects. A small number of students also reflected on the nature of the multidisciplinary work and their quest to experience a transdisciplinary team.

Development of negotiated roles. There was some discrepancy between team member's experiences of natural and negotiated roles within the group. Initially, the group began with naturally emerging, flexible roles but as they learnt more about each other's disciplines, roles were structured and agreed on. Some team members felt that the agreed goals and roles were useful.

> By establishing our individual strengths and weaknesses and establishing what our goals were earlier in the semester, the decision to have sub-groups gave group members with similar strengths the opportunity to work closely together to achieve our team goals - 1.

However, other team members reported feeling some confusion or lack of a strong purpose within the group.

> I'm struggling to feel like I have a necessary solid need or reason to be in the group. - 4

> Team members in our situation seemed to lack a 'coherent, defensible sense of purpose' within the project,. - 3

Multidisciplinary practice. Overall students were positive about the opportunities provided in a multi-disciplinary team context.

After undertaking the CSLL, and working with this team, I feel much more confident in my ability to work within a team from many different disciplines. I understand a lot more about the differences between the disciplines, and what to expect (to an extent), from individuals from each discipline. - 3

This project has really taught me the crucial aspects of a successful team. The biggest difference about the team would be the fact that we all come from a diverse range of disciplines. I can now understand the importance of being able to recognise your group members thought processes and approaches to work as it will affect the outcome of you work. - 1

I have learnt a lot through this process not only about my strengths within this project but my limitations. Furthermore, I have learnt where the skills of other team members compensate for my deficits, which in turn allows for a more effective team dynamic - 7

However, some students did report some challenges related to working in this type of team. These comments were not explicitly negative, instead the students indicated that they learnt from these challenges and could identify ways that they would respond differently in the future.

I need to question "How can I balance my work style with my fellow members?" – 2

Some students also reported that multidisciplinary work was helping them to see beyond their own discipline. These students also indicated a willingness to explore other perspectives beyond those endorsed within their own discipline's training.

As my degree comes to a close, I find I am less and less bound to the roots that were so strictly driven into me in the first two years of my studies. I feel it is the natural shift from being a student/academic towards being a creative or account manager. - 3

One student discussed their desire to experience truly transdisciplinary work; however, commented that the current team did not achieve this state. It is interesting to note that this was the student who had studied across three different disciplines.

I feel that we have fallen short of reaching the elusive transdisciplinary level of thought. I consider the movement between discipline knowledge, unlike PAR to be linear in nature. In order to progress from operating within your own discipline to a transdisciplinary state, you must first move through the multi and transdisciplinary phases. - 6

Learning and the education environment

Beyond teamwork, the students also reflected on their own development and growth throughout the project. The superordinate theme of learning and the education environment refers to the insights students shared about their learning and how the formal academic setting interacted with the project. Themes emerging here were student personal growth, student identity as a professional, and the tension between PAR and assessment agendas.

Personal growth. Some students identified broad areas of personal growth.

This unit has facilitated my understanding of metacognitive processes and has encouraged me to actively think about the way in which I think. – 6

I have been enrolled in other units in the past where I have been unhappy with the structure of the course but have never actually had the courage to approach the teaching staff in the way that we had this week. - 5

Assumptions are not always negative. They can tell me a lot about how I'm feeling and assist me to assess situations. But, assumptions can influence my work unknowingly. I need to start training myself to recognise how I act on assumption. So in future I can stop, reflect and take action without pushing my beliefs on others. -2

Student identity as a professional. Most students discussed their own developing professional identity in some way. Many reported that their own professional identity had been clarified or enhanced in some way through the experience.

This unit has facilitated my understanding of metacognitive process and has encouraged me to actively think about the way in which I think. – 6

I feel through this stage of the project have gained a new appreciation for the importance of my skills within this project when trying to determine the interests of the stakeholders – 7

As for my own discipline, I certainly felt a stronger connection with my discipline knowledge and how it could be applied to the project as time went by. - 1

Others clearly reported that the experience had highlighted just how formative their own professional frameworks were and that there was still considerable room for growth and development.

> I am still an emerging practitioner. I don't know everything and being open to learn from your mistakes will make your framework stronger. – 2

> I guess I'm having my own personal identity crisis at the moment just doing this project, but its honestly making me think more and more about what my actual course can bring me in the real world. - 4

Tension between the PAR and assessment agendas. After an experience in which their assessment was reviewed and they were asked to resubmit work, students became keenly aware of the different agendas aligned with PAR and assessment practices. Although academic staff aimed to minimise this impact and to be supportive of the two agendas, most students reflected on this dissonance.

> I feel this subject has massively detoured, because it started off about a goal for the community that just so happened to be graded at the end of the semester. Sitting on the final weeks of the term, the focus has slipped greatly from the organization to the assessment – 4

> All our excitement about the project had been drained and we all felt helpless as to finding a balance between the project needs and the discipline coordinators needs. - 1

PAR model allowing feedback to staff for next offering/stage of the subject

After the revision of the proposal, staff engaged with students in a discussion about how the perceived discrepancies had emerged and what could be done to balance the academic requirements and need to genuinely honour the wishes of the community partner. Some students discussed this event in their reflections and

suggested that this had been a positive aspect of the project. They also each mentioned the fact that they were able to influence future offerings of the subject.

> <Academic's name> explained that unfortunately due to ethical reasons the assessment weighting would remain the same. However, there would be weighting adjustments made for future projects like this one. It was such a relief to hear that <academic> understood where we were coming from and it really meant a lot to the team. – 1

> Even though we did not get a response that will change the current course of the unit I am still very appreciative towards the tutors for understanding where we are coming from, and taking our opinions on board to potentially implement them into next semester's course structure… It is also satisfying to know that our feedback will impact the structure of the unit for future students.– 5

Community and University perspectives of outcomes

Representatives from the organisation (c) and the university (a) were asked to respond to the analysis of student reflections and share their reflections on the student experience. The analysis of these responses focused on points of similarity and difference both between the community partner and academic staff. Four main themes of similarity were identified: student outcomes, PAR and disciplinary frameworks, balance between education and serving the community, and uncertainty in the workplace. There was also one theme highlighted by the community that wasn't shared in the academic reflection (Learning for the community) and one theme highlighted by the academic staff member that was not shared in the community reflection (Balance between education and serving the community). As these aspects were observed at the individual

level only, their status as 'themes' is loosely assigned. However, they are shared here as points of deviation between the reflections.

Student outcomes

What comes through the student feedback is the beginnings of a professional identity and how this interacts and can be applied to different settings, frameworks and understandings. – c

> *The students have spoken to developing team and professional skills throughout the process…That the students were well aware of the team setting and their professional skills is a great testament to the Learning Lab process. –c*

> *Anecdotal evidence (talking to students' involved in Kyabra project after the final presentation) suggested a genuine enthusiasm for the project…and there was an appreciation of the complexities of educational constraints vs. real world problems. – a*

PAR and disciplinary frameworks

Both parties reflected on the difference that disciplinary background can have on the student experience of PAR.

> *Understandably, students from other disciplines may have found this framework (PAR) challenging when they are not familiar with it and when they are more connected to empiricist frameworks. – c*

> *In creative disciplines, this degree of muddled uncertainty as to how a project unfolds is a relatively common situation and many designers/practitioners thrive on the improvisation required for project fruition. - a*

Uncertainty in the workplace

Both the community partner and the academic staff member reflected on the frustrations that students had expressed in the face of changes to the project goals throughout the semester. Both parties reflected that this aspect of the project was highly relevant to 'real' work contexts and could be a learning opportunity.

> *Some of the frustrations have been around the shifting goal posts. Shifting goal posts can be a reality of work 'in the real world' and developing strategies and ways to deal with this are part of the ongoing learning process. To have this present in a supported learning environment can be viewed as an opportunity for students – c*

> *In authentic real world contexts, complex activities and projects often become muddled as a result of unforeseen issues that arise in project directions. Critical decisions are often made 'on the fly' to move the task forward and the team involved in the project negotiate the shifting sands of complexity. – a*

Learning for community

While the staff reflection did not highlight any individual level learning, the community partner reflected on how student involvement had changed the thinking of the staff within their organisation.

> *The contribution of the students involved in the Learning Lab gave us the ability to think about and consider different perspectives and ways of doing. We would not have had this opportunity otherwise. - c*

Balance between education and serving the community

The academic staff member commented on the balance between reaching educational goals and upholding the

values of serving the community partner as a particularly important challenge related to the student experience.

> *when complex and ongoing real world projects with limited pre-determined outcomes, such as Kyabra project, are embedded in educational contexts there is a possibility of a highly charged tension – on one side there is the need for spontaneity to align to industry/partner needs and on the other is the strict beholden requirement for clear and definable assessment outcomes. – a*

Discussion

The student reflections, with feedback from the community partner and academic team, provide a unique opportunity to learn from the first offering of the lab and to re-design the classes based on our stakeholders and partners. These reflections also offer an understanding of how students respond to PAR and SL models.

1. Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered important enough to warrant attention?)? Are the shared values of PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the project?
2. What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?
3. What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

***Do students reflect on PAR or SL (are these themes considered
important enough to warrant attention?)? Are the shared values of
PAR and SL represented in their reports of how they conducted the
project?***

The student reflections indicate that while the student project could
not be described as a pure PAR process, the students to varying
degrees embraced the values of PAR. This outcome has not been
widely explored in the literature and adds to past findings that
show improvements in civic responsibility, professional skills
(Lizzio & Watson 2004: 482), and reflection (Bourner & Ellerker
1998). Some of the student reflections indicate the difficulty in
moving to a PAR method of inquiry when your 'home discipline'
largely embraces a more empiricist framework. The students (and
community and academic staff) also identified difficulties in
adopting action research within an assessable unit. All stakeholders
identified that there are tensions between these two agendas and
these need to be managed by teacher/facilitator adopting this
model. This issue is one that is rarely discussed in the literature and
warrants further examination.

***What do students feel they learnt from the experience? Is this
reported learning similar or different between the disciplines?***

Much of the student feedback about learning focused on the
development of team skills and professional skills. While some
students struggled to find a place in the team, the group did engage
in negotiations about tasks and skills. The multidisciplinary nature
of this experience also meant that many of the students formed an
identity that was based on the discipline of their training. From this
reinforcing of identity, some students appeared to first find the
experience helpful in understanding the strengths and application
of their 'home' discipline. A small number of students also
indicated a strong interest in learning how to use multidisciplinary
work to their benefit and one student spoke of a desire to reach
transdisciplinarity. Further, it was noted that double degree (two
degrees from different faculties) students seemed to have been
more comfortable with acknowledging and working with different

frameworks and perspectives. At the very least, these multiple-discipline students recognised these issues in their reflective writing more than single degree students. A recent review of a sample of 30 work placements in Australia reveal that most programs focus on single discipline area placements (Orrell 2011); further exploration of these issues could encourage more multi-disciplinary ventures and support the existing programs.

What else can the academic team learn about the student experience of this subject through the reflections? Can these reflections guide improvements to the subject?

The student reflections have provided valuable feedback to the community and academic team and sparked a number of shared and unique reflections from the community and staff representatives.

Consistent with PAR principles (Burns 2007: 19), the future stages of this project are underway and the academic team is working with community partners and students on a number of aims including 1) ensuring meaningful progress is made towards the complex and ongoing problems proposed by the community partners, including developing staged progressive projects to be worked on by different students, 2) the academic and assessment features of the unit are developed in a way that facilitates meaningful synergy between action research values and learner assessment and evaluation, 3) the contributions of community and learners are valued within academic processes and that these partnerships with academic staff are based on PAR and SL principles (e.g., Bringle, Clayton, & Price 2009).

Conclusion

This case study of the Lab provides insight for other service focused universities and learning centres aiming to provide authentic collaboration and learning between students and their local communities. The Lab is a continuing venture at the host university

and the partnership with the community organisation involved in the case study is continuing. While student evaluations of their experience were generally positive, the reflections also highlight areas for improvement and design refinement. In particular, the students have raised an important issue about the conflicting agendas held by the university and the community partner. This action research project facilitated the development of a new multi-disciplinary subject that embraces values and principles from action research and SL. Reflections by the community partner and academic staff, generated during the data analysis process indicate willingness to contribute to continual improvement of the student experience. Through utilising an action research framework for both the academic development of the unit and the student projects, the university has been able to collaborate with and learn from community partners and to raise questions regarding the expectations and practices of the academic environment.

> '*We were introduced to different perspectives and ways of thinking and it appeared the students were too.*' - Community partner

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Stakeholder voices: exploring responsibility, trust and sustainable outcomes in a community leadership program

Joy Murray, Donna McClelland, Jodi-Lee Rash, Rej Creaton

Abstract

Five years after the end of a leadership development program four stakeholders explore responsibility for and sustainability of its outcomes. The stakeholder voices are those of the project leader and three participants; the context is a community leadership program for residents of government housing estates in Eastern Sydney. We take the position that the program leader is primarily responsible to the participants, rather than funding body, for the outcomes of the program. Being responsible to the participants in a community leadership program brings a whole new set of possibilities, in particular it means that leadership of the program is in the hands of participants. They must be the leaders from the beginning and across all facets: projects, monitoring, administration and evaluation. But first we have to define leadership. Later we have to define sustainable outcome. Behind the management of this program and the definitions that evolved lies a cybernetic/systems approach to action learning and action research[1].

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[1] Throughout this paper we take *action learning* to mean the learning of individuals through participation in a range of activities by means of which each learns something different depending on their needs and personal history; by *action research* we mean participation with others in the initiation, planning and execution of a project, with the group giving importance to reflection, learning and mutual support.

Keywords: Participatory action research; action learning; participative evaluation; constructivism; cybernetics; systems theory

Introduction

In order to explore stakeholder voices in action learning and research this paper tells the story of a community leadership program. We regard the whole leadership program as action research. It involved the program leader working with government and non-government organisations and community members in a discovery and learning program to define leadership and to identify and develop leadership skills. It also involved participative monitoring and evaluation of the entire four year program and our reflections on the sustainability of its outcomes five years after the program ended.

We take the position that the program leader was primarily responsible to the participants for the outcomes of the program rather than to the funding body or managing organisation. Underpinning the theoretical position behind this approach is the cybernetic notion that learning is constructed by the learner out of his/her own history of interactions over a life-time plus whatever there is in the environment that fits with the learner's current state and is therefore recognized by him/her in some way (Skarda, 1999; Moser, 2002; Brier, 1999, Bale, 2000). Thus any changes brought about in the learner as s/he interacts in learning environments is in fact learning (Maturana & Varela, 1992). Such an approach means that there can be no 'voice of authority' telling the learner what to learn and no expectation that the learner will learn whatever it is that the program leader has intended (Maturana & Varela, 1992; Brier, 1999, 2000; Jarvilahto, 1999). Thus the program leader's role is to set up learning experiences most likely to resonate with participants, maximising the opportunities for internalisation of the learning and therefore sustainability of the outcomes as a part of each participant's being. To maximise the chances of success these

experiences must be devised by the participants themselves with the program leader as 'participant-conceptualizer or co-conceptualizer' (Ison, 2008:150). They cannot be imposed according to a funding body's requirements and expectations. The program therefore becomes a participant driven action-learning program in which all participants learn what it is they need to learn in order to facilitate their on-going participation in projects of their own devising. The learning and the leadership will emerge from the process.

Given this theoretical framework it follows that participants in this project made up the steering committee and steered the program. Members of the organisation managing the program on behalf of the funding body and members of other community organisations who had expected to constitute the steering committee responsible for the work of the program leader, attended meetings in order to identify opportunities to contribute to participant learning. Below three participants and the program leader reflect on what worked for them and why. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 tells the story of the program, its context, implementation and evaluation; it provides a rich picture in which to ground the theoretical framework that follows. Section 3 describes the participative evaluation strategy; Section 4 explains the theoretical framework behind the decisions that were made. Section 5 examines what we mean by sustainable outcomes and Section 6 concludes.

The story

Context

The Eastern Sydney Community Leadership Program was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and managed by The Benevolent Society (TBS). It began in 2003 as part of the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. It was awarded $216,360 over two years to build the leadership capacities of individuals and groups living in

public housing estates in the Eastern suburbs of Sydney. The funding proposal was supported by the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Housing and NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE). In 2005 the project was awarded a further $141,936 for a sixteen-month extension as a Local Answers project.

The Leadership Program was located in a small office above a large public library in Maroubra, South East Sydney. It was TBS's first foray into community leadership and they were willing to play a hands-off role, providing fortnightly meetings with a supervisor whose approach was: What can I do to support what you're doing. It was this open and supportive approach that made everything that followed possible.

The intended program

The original proposal specified courses in leadership and a structured process. It stated, for example, that 100 individuals [will] participate in a structured community leadership process; and that 75 people [will] complete the process and 70% [will] report they have established a leadership role in their communities. Against which, in the first report to the Commonwealth, was recorded: Six parents participate in course to teach skills to discuss drug and alcohol issues with family and community.

Another objective stated that 100 individuals [will] experience tailored support for development as community leaders; and that 75 people [will] complete the process and 70% report that they have been individually supported in their development. Against this in the first report was written: Training for four community leaders as group discussion leaders. But where were the leadership courses, what were these leadership roles going to be and where were the 50-plus leaders going to come from? A steering committee with representation from the Department of Housing, TAFE and other service providers was intended to provide advice on how to answer these questions. However action research and participative decision-making called for a different approach.

The actual program

The program steering committee met after an initial six months of activities that included computer courses at the local High School. When it did meet, rather than drawing membership from government departments and services, the steering committee comprised Leadership Program participants who had attended one of the computer courses or some other activity. Service providers were invited to attend as observers. The program participants reported on the courses and workshops that they had attended during the previous six months. They set the agenda for the coming six months. The role of service providers was to offer whatever support was needed for the agenda set by participants.

> It started with a pamphlet in the mail to do a computer course at our local high school. After completing the course I was asked to join the steering committee to decide what courses we would like to do next. We had observers who attended the meetings – people from the Benevolent Society, Housing NSW, the Shack Outreach and Matraville High School but the observers did not steer the committee we, the public, did. As a group we decided what we wanted to do. We chose courses we wanted to do, we did video recording and started a local community newsletter that we wrote, edited and delivered every quarter. We also video-taped our projects with the skills we had learned. We had quarterly meetings to steer the program, which led to some of the participants becoming teachers themselves. We did flower arrangement courses, aromatherapy, Swedish massage, parenting courses, writing skills, Photoshop, mental health courses. We were active in our learning and enjoying it. At the end of the whole program we went on a wonderful retreat. (J-L R)

Although no one realised it at the time this was in fact the beginning of a structured community leadership process and these

newly found community leaders – who at the time would have seen themselves as anything but – were devising their own tailored support for their leadership development. We were doing systemic action research grounded in a cybernetic understanding of how the world works (Ison, 2008).

Instead of responsibility for devising leadership programs being vested in the service providers it was given to the participants – those usually at the receiving end of someone else's idea of what constitutes leadership training. Instead of learning about leadership, participants were doing leadership. And what the participants saw as their needs was in many cases far from what might have been devised for them by workers in service provision. With the support of TBS the traditional model was turned upside down.

Training needs identified from the inside

Participants were interested in a wide range of activities none of which on the face of it could be called leadership development. For example they nominated: child development, IT, drug and alcohol awareness, jewellery making, massage, and flower arranging. The local high school, youth service and TAFE Outreach provided venue, resources and teachers. The Leadership Program provided co-ordination, additional teachers and resources. Mid-year the process was repeated with requests for: greeting card making, flower arranging, small engine maintenance, aromatherapy, child development, self esteem building, nutrition and IT. Again the Leadership Program collaborated with service providers to fulfil the requests. The role of the program leader was to knit together the threads that would make each separate project work, and look for the pattern that was emerging as people began to learn new skills.

Setting the six-monthly agenda and knitting together the wherewithal to make the projects work was repeated each semester

with a steadily growing steering committee. About half way through the project a group of participants who wanted to produce a newsletter, later to be known as Local Visions, were given keys to a vacant unit in a local retirement village owned by TBS. Using Leadership Program funds it was equipped with filing cabinet, video camera, computer, printer, telephone and internet access providing not only the facilities necessary for producing a newsletter and organising courses and events but a real reason to learn new IT skills and to negotiate and develop office management systems. An action research approach had allowed authentic learning experiences to evolve (Stein et al, 2004) as the program evolved.

> Local Visions was the steering committee's initiative. It was a newsletter that targeted our local community and current issues. We had full editorial control as a team with no outside censorship. Firstly we decided what skills would be needed to write, print and distribute a newsletter and then we participated in: a creative writing course; courses on layout and design; computer skills; office management skills; and videoing and editing skills. The Benevolent Society provided us with an office in a retirement village. The whole team had keys and free access to the office equipment – internet, phones, printers, computer and video camera. We could come and go as we chose in order to do research or to layout the newsletter. The office made us as a team feel that we were being taken seriously and it was a professional venture. We felt like we were contributing to our community. Local Visions consisted of editorials on issues of local and national concern and regular columns such as: the Garden Gnome with advice on all aspects of gardening and planting; Thin Lizzy a regular column with advice on life; a health related column; and make up tips. One issue contained a 2-page liftout of emergency contact numbers and community services. We always had lots of local photography, recipes and advertising for up coming courses organised by the steering committee. As a team we distributed Local Visions throughout the South Eastern Suburbs. (D McC)

Leadership

Through the strategy of running community courses the participant base gradually expanded. The role of the program leader was to explain this strategy to TBS and the funding body as credible and coherent leadership development. Although courses provided skills training, curriculum content like flower arrangement and small engine maintenance could hardly be called leadership training. However such courses did provide opportunities for people to meet and talk – or network and communicate, which are vital skills for any leader (e.g. Woolcock, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

The next step was to discuss with participants how they would like to apply their new skills and expanding networks to community development. For example the development of basic IT skills led to the foundation of the community newsletter. Video recording to document progress led to a video skills training course and future video documentaries produced by participants. The support and encouragement provided by the whole group led to one Leadership Program participant conducting aromatherapy classes, another a ten-week Singing for Non-Singers course and another running a weekly art class.

Further illustration of participants' growing confidence was their rejection of a suggestion from TBS that they organise and run a conference for local service providers and academics. In order to understand what 'a conference' entailed several Leadership Program participants attended one. After reporting back to the larger group they voted to organise and conduct a community fair instead. A community fair, they felt, would be appreciated by the local population whereas a conference would have appeal only to an unrepresentative minority.

A group attended a seminar on Education and Social Action at the University of Technology Sydney, but they thought it was boring so the concept of the Coral Sea Fair was born instead. I was attending one of the computer courses at the time and was asked by the teacher if I would like to help organise the fair. I jumped at the chance. We met weekly at the local library to make decisions about what we wanted to do and who would do what. Organising a fair doesn't come with a set of instructions and an allen key. Some of us had to do a food handling course with the Council so that we could serve food at the fair. Some of us had to negotiate use of the Coral Sea Park with the local football club, and some had to negotiate with the council for permission to hold the fair which was a long and complicated business especially when it came to insurance. Then there were all the kids' rides to negotiate and stalls to organise and the local groups to contact for face painting and crafts. The local police were invited and the fire brigade. This meant that after every meeting we sat on the phones in the Leadership Program office talking with food outlets, coffee carts, fairground operators and equipment providers getting the best possible deals wherever we could. My job was to organise the hire of a stage and sound equipment and conduct auditions for a full program of entertainment – local performers aged from 8 yrs to 80! And of course the Mayor, the local State Member of Parliament and the Federal MP. Once the program was in place there were posters to be painted and printed and fliers to deliver. On the day of the fair we had to be there at 4.30am to oversee the stage and sound set-up and direct traffic around the site as stalls, chairs and rides began to arrive with the dawn. I spent my day back stage managing the many acts as well as greeting the politicians. It was a great day with crowds of people attending and a good write-up in the local press and our Local Visions newsletter. (R C)

At this point the program provided the training and support that the fair organisers requested in order to accomplish their aim. For example in preparation for organising the fair Leadership Program participants undertook a TAFE Events Planning course for which they gained certification. Thus a coherent three-step process emerged; one that took its lead from participants yet began to resemble leadership development that could be reported to the funding body:

1. Attend a course of some kind;
2. Attend a steering committee meeting and become part of the planning group, planning courses for self and others; and
3. Initiate a community action of some kind and request specific training to provide the skills necessary to accomplish the goal (e.g. food handling course for council approval to sell food at community event; communication and negotiation skills for working with other organizations and the local council; journalistic writing, word processing, layout and design courses for writing and publishing a community newsletter).

Although these ideas were beginning to gel as a coherent leadership development strategy in the mind of the program leader it was not until about half way through the first funding period that the topic arose in discussion among participants. The Local Visions newsletter team decided to run a lead article on leadership. In order to write the article they needed to come to an understanding of what they meant by leadership and also of what it meant in the context of their own participation in the leadership program. They didn't feel that they fitted the conventional idea of leader, yet they were part of a leadership program and were definitely leading the way for many members of the community. For example, they felt that they were showing: the way out of isolation; the way to gaining skills and education; and the way to taking action on things they felt strongly about. As they discussed the meaning of leadership they gathered the views of steering committee members,

members of the Coral Sea fair group and the program leader. Out of this whole discussion they developed a broad view of leadership believing that undertaking any kind of education or training can be a brave move and is in fact leading by example. In defining leadership in such broad terms a way of meeting the funding body's requirements also emerged.

By the end of the third year hundreds of people had participated in something. They had stepped out and tried something new. Many had participated in the steering committee and helped organise courses for themselves and others. Some had become volunteers for TBS, some had formed a group to address a local issue and a handful had taken on leadership roles and were acknowledged as leaders in their communities (Figure 1). We decided that leadership should be defined in the broadest possible terms, saying that anyone who participates in a formal learning program is leading by example; they are saying to others: 'it's never too late to learn'. We talked about other ways of being a leader, for example: by assisting in organising courses and events (e.g. by being part of the steering committee) by volunteering, by networking, and by being acknowledged as a leader by others (Figure 2). Thus not only were program participants part of the leadership team through the steering committee, they also took on a fundamental role in defining the very foundations of the program and therefore in how it was reported to the funding body. This included participation in the program's evaluation.

Fig 1: In our evolving vision of leaders and leadership we defined step 1 as stepping out of your everyday life to try something different, something that had been organised for you by a funded body – in our case a course or workshop organised by a government or non-government organisation. Step 2 was to participate in programming and organising workshops for self and others, guided and funded by a government or non-government organisation. Step 3 was to train and work as a volunteer for an
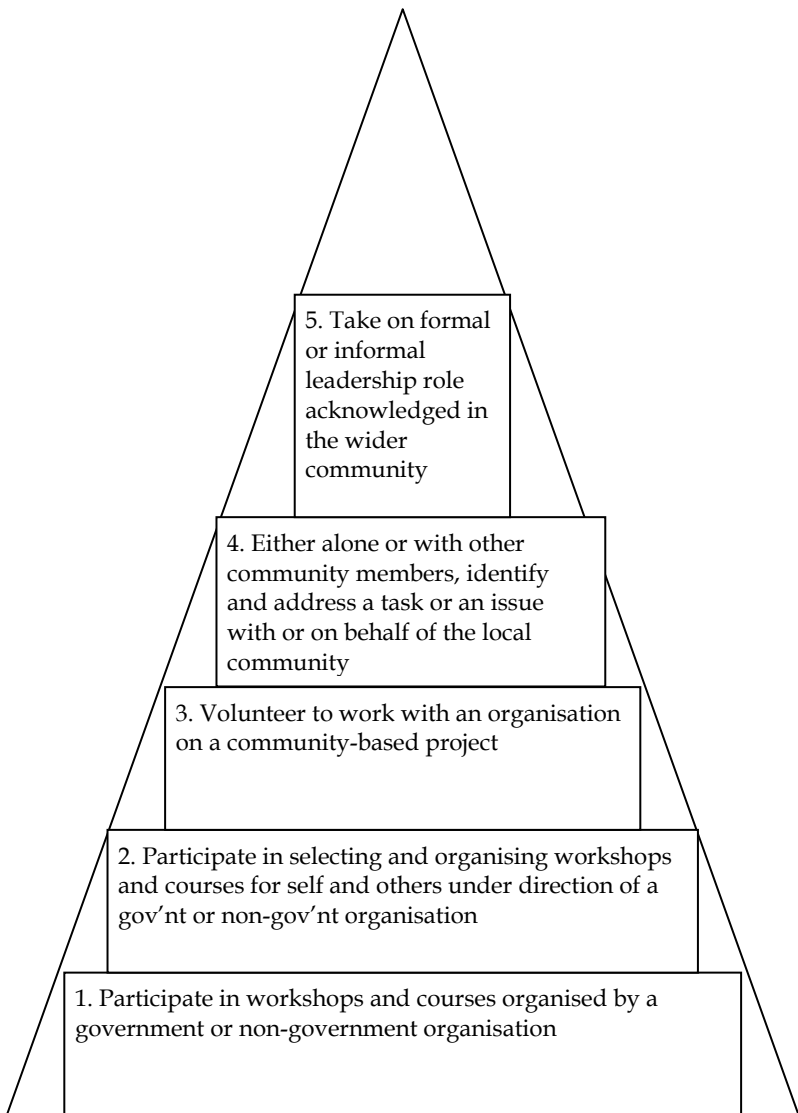
5. Take on formal or informal leadership role acknowledged in the wider community

4. Either alone or with other community members, identify and address a task or an issue with or on behalf of the local community

3. Volunteer to work with an organisation on a community-based project

2. Participate in selecting and organising workshops and courses for self and others under direction of a gov'nt or non-gov'nt organisation

1. Participate in workshops and courses organised by a government or non-government organisation

Figure 1: Leadership roles

organisation. Step 4 was to initiate action and join with others in the community, seeking funding and drawing on expertise as necessary, to accomplish a task or address an issue. Step 5 was to be acknowledged by the wider community as a leader (e.g. through winning an award or gaining funding) invited to join committees and advise government and non-government organisations.
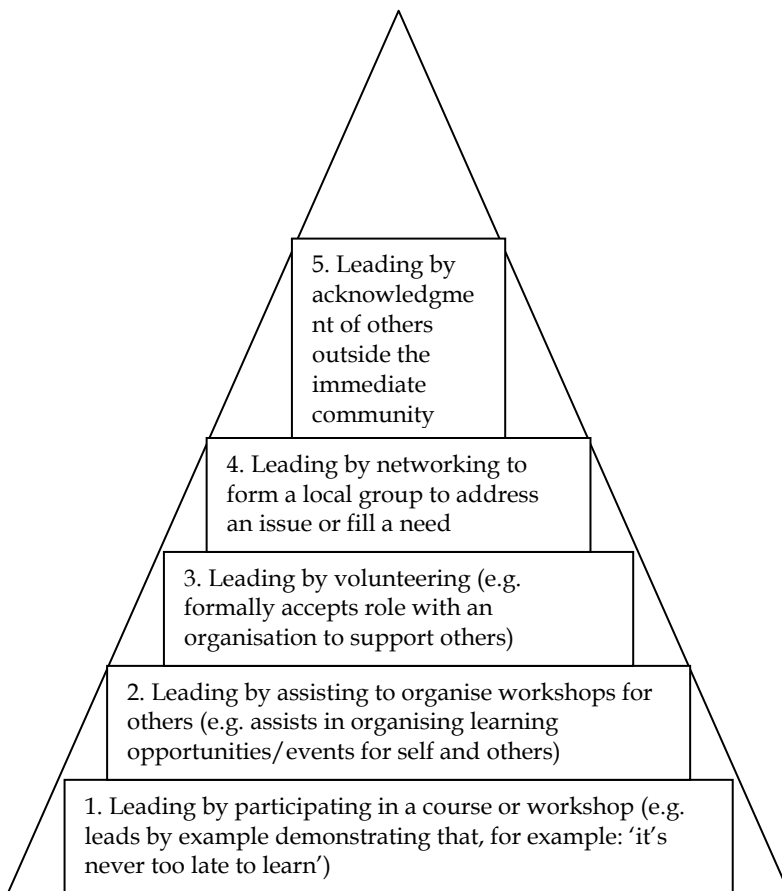

Figure 2: Ways of being a leader

Fig 2: In our evolving vision of what it means to be a leader we defined step 1 as leading by example, by participating in something and in effect saying to all those around that learning is a good thing, or trying something new is good for you. Step 2 we saw as leading by assisting others to take step 1; in our case this was by helping to initiate the courses and workshops to be conducted and encouraging friends and relations to join them. Step 3 was leading by volunteering; this was seen as a more formal acceptance of a leadership role. Step 4 was leading by networking to form a group and address an issue, calling on expertise as necessary and seeking funding. Step 5 was leading by acknowledgment of others; becoming a recognised leader, someone to whom organisations will turn for advice and assistance.

Program evaluation

The funding body required six-monthly reports which were predominantly quantitative concerning total numbers of participants, their gender and age2.
As a way of monitoring progress numbers can tell a clear and concise story; however they cannot tell the messy story of the way in which a project evolves on the ground, which is usually based on the painstaking building of relationships over time. Numbers are not designed to capture the richness of practice. The reporting pro-forma did, however, include an invitation to reflect which provided an opportunity for participative evaluation.

Participative monitoring and evaluation strategies

The original proposal earmarked funding for an external evaluation. Instead we used the funding to develop evaluation and monitoring skills amongst participants. In 2003 a video maker was contracted to work with community members to document the

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[2] E.g. In 2005/6 275 people accessed at least one workshop/course: 115 male, 160 female; ages from 12 years to 65 plus years: 94 participants between the ages 12 and 19 years; 90 between the ages 25 and 44 years; 35 between the ages 45 and 54 years.

learning of participants in the computer course. This video was submitted to the funding body as part of the report. The video maker then ran a course in video and interviewing skills which participants used to document the learning taking place in the Leadership Program's small engines course. This course later became Racing to the Top (RTTT), an award winning project to keep young Aboriginal students engaged with education. The video was submitted to the funding body and also shown to an audience of staff, students and parents at the local high school. Through discussion, prompted initially by the Local Visions newsletter group, participants and program leader pieced together their response to the funding body. The various courses provided by the Leadership Program were seen as leadership courses because they were about skills and experiences in preparation for leadership, or they were about building networks, something that is essential for the emergence of leadership roles and leadership skills in any community (Woolcock, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Some, like the IT and writing courses and discussion facilitation skills, were directly linked to skills that potential leaders might need. Other courses like Drug and Alcohol Awareness gave people leadership roles in the community. Courses like Aromatherapy, Singing for Non-Singers and Small Engines, all presented by Leadership Program participants, put community members into teaching roles. Volunteer training prepared people for a range of community roles; and the Local Visions Newsletter, art class and Coral Sea Fair provided leadership opportunities in the local area that were acknowledged by hundreds of people.

Thus the Leadership Program addressed the funding body's criteria for success, however in a different way from that anticipated in the proposal.

Summative evaluation

After the Leadership Program finished TBS commissioned a six-month participative evaluation. Nine participants agreed to assist3. They interviewed each other, wrote their personal experiences, edited the document and made recommendations for future leadership programs. However if this was to be a truly participative evaluation the theory underpinning the program leader's decision making had to be on the table. The group for the first time shared and discussed the cybernetic/systems theoretical framework and added their comments to the theoretical chapter of the evaluation report.

Theoretical framework

Action research and action learning emerge out of a constructivist paradigm, which is quite different from the worldview that underpinned the original submission to the funding body. It places emphasis on stakeholders and process rather than counting and measuring. It supports the notion that whatever emerges from the research exists by virtue of being defined and given a boundary (or boundaries) by the research process itself, which is part of the researchers' lives and includes everyone who plays a role (in this case the program leader, Leadership Program participants and various service providers). In our case a system – the Leadership Program – gradually emerged from the background environment as a coherent whole. The universe is an environment out of which we can carve many systems. A system jumps out from the background environment when we notice it as a coherent whole against the background noise. For example, I may notice that car drivers are becoming more aggressive, this is a difference in the normal pattern of events. It jumps out from the background of car driving. I give it a label, road rage. I identify conditions in which I

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3   A year later four participants and the program leader co-authored a book that followed on from this evaluation: Murray J, Rash J-L, Creaton R, Cooley P and McClelland D, *Views from the inside: Participant Perspectives on Community Leadership*. CommonGround Publishing Pty Ltd., Victoria, 2009

think it occurs and talk about it. Road rage becomes a phenomenon, soon it is noticed by others. The distinction I made between road rage and other driving arose from my interest in pondering over this phenomenon and in extracting this particular meaning from it. Once I have made this distinction the system I have distinguished from other driving (i.e. Road Rage) becomes information to me. The information did not belong to me independent of the phenomenon; I had to notice something, a difference, for there to be any information to know. Nor did the information belong to the phenomenon, which did not 'exist' until I distinguished it from the background environment of everyday driving and gave it a name. The information, and associated learning, arose in interaction between living system (in this case me) and environment, it belonged to us both, created somewhere in the space between us.

In the same way the Leadership Program came into being. What emerged from the action research process was a system of experiences that over time formed themselves into a coherent pattern of learning that led to leadership development. In Bateson's (1972:381) words this emerging coherence became a "difference which makes a difference", that is, it became meaningful information for those involved; it stood out from the background 'noise' of everyday life as a coherent system.

Through a cybernetic lens a particular system and a particular environment do not have an existence as system-and-environment until I, the observer, distinguish them from background noise and define them as system-and-environment. This fits with Maturana and Varela's (1987) view that we create the world by living in it. By inhabiting spaces over time with the participants who were part of this program we created a world together that would not otherwise have existed. The program leader saw herself as a co-conceptualiser of the evolving program, part of 'an interacting ecology of systems' (Ison, 2007: 150). A description of this world, a text that provided a symbolic presentation of our construction of this world, later constituted the summative evaluation.

Cybernetics is one way of looking at the world. Like any other philosophical position it has implications for how we explain the world. In a cybernetic view of the world the observer is always part of a system that is observed by another and so on; and as part of the system the observer always, because s/he's in the system rather than outside of it, makes a difference to the system; and the system inevitably makes a difference to the would-be observer (von Foerster, 1992; Fell & Russell, 1994; Glanville, 1995; Murray, 2007). We are all involved.

This process of changing and being changed in the process of living is what Maturana and Varela call learning (1987). Learning, they say, is constructed by the learner out of his/her own history of interactions over a life time and whatever there is in the environment that fits with the learner's current state and is therefore recognized by him/her in some way (see also Brier, 1999).Thus any changes brought about in the learner as s/he interacts in the learning environments is in fact learning. Maturana and Varela (1992), Brier (1999, 2000) and Jarvilehto (1999) say that the environment can only act as a non-specific trigger – triggering changes in us according to our structure at that instant. We are modified by every experience. Although we are unaware of much of the stream of change it enables us to go on living. And since one person's world is always different from another person's world because we are different people (different 'structures') we cannot have a common experience (Ison, 2007). We all take away different things from any encounter. The outcomes are different for each of us and the outcomes for each of us become part of who we are.

Such an approach means that there can be no 'voice of authority' telling the learner what to learn and no expectation that the learner will learn whatever it is that someone else has intended. Thus the program leader's role is to set up learning experiences most likely to resonate with participants. Such experiences can only be devised

in partnership with the participants themselves; only they know what they want or need to learn. The program therefore becomes a participant driven action-learning program in which all participants learn what it is they need in order to facilitate their on-going participation in projects of their own devising. The person designated 'program leader', the managing body and service providers take their lead from and are responsible to the participants.

Sustainable outcomes

So what were the longer-term outcomes of the Leadership Program and are they sustainable? One way to measure sustainability might have been to identify which projects were still operating a year after the funding ceased. In our case there were not many. The newsletter did not continue because there was no longer any equipment or office space available to the writing team. The various courses did not continue because there was no funding to pay for presenters and venues. A scaled back community fair did happen the year after the program ended but was run by someone from outside the Leadership Program group. Through TBS a philanthropist provided backing for Racing to the Top, which continued to grow[4]. The art class continued to operate in premises owned by the Department of Housing and later the running of this class was passed on to its participants. The program leader and four participants co-authored a book as follow up to the participant evaluation.

So, few projects survived and of those that did survive only three, the art class, Racing to the Top and a writing team albeit much smaller in number than the original, made it past the first year. But is the continuation of projects what is meant by sustainable outcomes? Community Fairs all over the world have come and gone as the enthusiasm of local individuals and groups has waxed

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[4]   http://www.kooricommunications.com/ (accessed 18/09/2012)

and waned. Does this mean that they were not sustainable? If so was it a good or bad thing? Was their time up? Will something else flourish instead? Who's keeping count?

> Racing to the Top was a program designed by Peter Cooley to help keep Indigenous kids at school. It was not only for Indigenous kids and it was open to boys and girls. Over several weeks the kids learned to build petrol driven remote controlled racing cars. If they came to every session and didn't miss any of their other classes or subjects, they got to keep the car that they had built. Eighty per cent attendance was expected if kids were to keep the car. The program was a huge success. The teacher was pretty strict – the first time the program was run 1 or 2 of the kids didn't get their cars. But they were allowed to participate in the program again the following term and finally got their cars. This program has now been implemented in other schools around Australia. The program is funded by a private donor. Peter also won the 2005 NSW Department of Children's services – Children's week award. And in 2006 he received the Eastern Region Local Government Community Award for Reconciliation. Peter received a standing ovation for his presentation to the International Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Conference that was held at Darling Harbour in 2006. D McC)

A cybernetic view of the world affects this whole concept of sustainability. If every encounter – every second of our lived experience – becomes part of who we are then there is always going to be a personal outcome that is sustained over the long term. The question is not whether or not there are sustainable artefacts such as annual fairs. It is whether the personal outcomes, which are embodied, helped individual participants along the path towards leadership as we defined it above. Did our actions together contribute towards developing in all of us an appreciation that we are all leaders; that we all lead by example whoever we are. Did the

learning that we engaged in together take individuals along the life path that they wanted to tread? Perhaps the only way to find out would be to ask people five years on. But what if they were not aware of why they made this choice three, four, five years ago and not that one. Maturana and Varela (1992) say that we are unaware of much of the stream of change that enables us to go on living. If the experience becomes part of who we are it may only be in retrospect that we see a pattern emerge from the twists and turns of life – and then only if we deliberately stop and reflect.

> I find that I am now a sustainable outcome from the Leadership Program. Not as in a community event or class, but really what it was all about, getting involved, benefitting myself even if there were, in hindsight, benefits intended for the community. If the course in computers hadn't been based in the housing area where I lived, who knows if I would have taken that step. Now I am a co-author of a book, have acquired a diploma at TAFE and have been employed in my job of choice for 4 years. And I'm continuing to study to add to my CV. My experience with the Leadership Program gave me the confidence to know now that I am an asset to any work place with my qualifications and life experience. The Cybernetic learning environment provided through the Leadership Program changed my perspective on being involved in my life path and showed me the limits we put on our selves such as age, financial position, education, time. (D McC)

Conclusion

An action learning, action research community leadership program built on authentic relationships must be valued for its own sake in its own time. It is about achieving something important together at a particular period of our various lives. It is not about producing

artefacts that should then be preserved in order to prove to someone else that there were 'sustainable outcomes'. Neither is it preparation for some future life and the possibility of a leadership role in the community at some future time. It is about doing everyday leadership in the process of living together now. We living systems continually interact with our environment in an ever changing present.

A cybernetic view of the world suggests that the only environments that exist at any moment are the inside mind/body learning environment of the living system, which has been shaped by the living system's history of interactions, and the immediate outside environment with all the opportunities that it affords. The only possible learning that can occur is learning contingent on these two environments. An environment constructed with mutual trust is likely to bring about mutually satisfying learning. The sustainable outcomes of the Leadership Program are within each person. We are all leaders.

We are all in this together, we are all responsible for creating our world, we must all look out for each other. Responsibility is not linear; it cannot climb upwards towards a peak. It must cascade throughout the many layers of traditional systems of influence. The program leader's responsibility is to enable the creation of an environment in which this has a chance to flourish and to trust the participants to learn and continue to grow.

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Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World: Reflections and Future Perspectives

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Lesley Wood and Bob Dick

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on a panel discussion about an edited book launched at the 2012 ALARA Conference in Sydney. The majority of authors participated in the launch discussion and presented the message of their chapters, exploring real action possibilities for future sustainable development in their particular fields. Here three of them provide a brief account of their reflections: Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt writes the introduction and conclusion of the article, and comments on the background and conceptual framework of the book and its importance for the future; Bob Dick focuses on 'facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing "wicked" problems in an uncertain and complex world'; and Lesley Wood focuses on 'action research for sustainable social transformation'. The overall message is that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) and facilitative action leadership are effective and proven methods for sustainable development in our turbulent world in the 21st century. Readers are encouraged to apply and enhance a similar action research process and method to their collaborative work.

Introduction

No matter how valuable and important panel presentations and discussions at conferences, they are mostly presented only in oral form. Thus their useful insights are ephemeral, soon forgotten, and not accessible to people who might be interested in the topic but unable to attend the conference. There are, of course, exceptions, e.g., video recordings or transcriptions of oral presentations and discussions in conference proceedings, but more often than not these transcripts remain unpublished. Valuable learning opportunities are lost.

One such example is the engaging panel discussion before the launching of a new edited volume, *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) at the 2012 ALARA Conference in Sydney. After participating in the discussion, panel members agreed to capture the valuable opportunity to pass on insights by writing our reflections for an article in the next issue of the *ALAR Journal*. But most of the book's authors were unable to meet the submission deadline. The lesson I learnt for the future as a convenor of a panel discussion was that I would request panel members to submit a written paper before or during the conference when they have done their work anyway and can easily produce a draft. But as I had failed to do so, we – the three authors of this article had the choice to abandon the idea or seek to publish as an article at least our three reflections. We decided on the latter move and recognised this as an opportunity for reflecting on our own contributions to the edited volume and offering to readers the following: from Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt as the book editor and co-author, explanations of and reflections on this introduction and conclusion of this article, and the background and conceptual framework of the book; from Bob Dick as an author of a book chapter, a focus on 'facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing "wicked" problems in an uncertain and complex world'; and from Lesley Wood as the writer

of the 'Foreword' to the book, the perspective of a reviewer and advocacy for 'action research for sustainable social transformation'.

Background and Highlights of the Launched Book

The overarching topic of our panel discussion at the ALARA Conference (September 2012) was the title of a book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). This book was written by ALARA elders who have made a significant contribution to the field of action learning/action research for more than 20 years. The idea for this book was conceived after a symposium held at the last ALARA World Congress in Melbourne in 2010 with the theme: *Celebrating 20 Years of ALAR: Revisiting the Past for Present and Future,* for it was precisely 20 years since we had organised the 'First World Congress' of ALAR in Brisbane in 1990.

Sustainable development is an issue challenging us all as we move further into this increasingly turbulent twenty-first century. Therefore, most of the authors participated in this panel discussion and (1) briefly outlined the message of their chapters for the future, (2) explored real action possibilities for future sustainable development in their fields, and (3) joined with co-authors in the panel discussion, and with the audience in the debate and further exploration of these ideas, with practical applications in their own areas of action and development.

Some presentations by elders drew from their respective chapters in the book, while others complemented the book's chapters and extended out the *Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* theme – conceptually and in practice – with a future perspective. They included explanations of how sustainable development can be achieved through:

1. A conceptual framework and new models of action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world through

collaborative action learning, participatory action research and democratic action leadership required for individuals, groups and whole organisations/communities to work together effectively (Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt).

2. Facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing "wicked" problems in an uncertain and complex world (Bob Dick).

3. Action research for sustainable social transformation (Lesley Wood).

4. Action research as an enabler of integrative thinking for sustainable innovation, learning and development in business (Shankar Sankaran with Saul Brown).

5. Self-directed learning and community development with a cascade effect into other communities (Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt with Judith Kearney).

6. Action research strategies for sustainable development in public sector organisations (Ron Passfield).

7. A global epistemological transformation of what counts as educational knowledge, with a focus on improving practice and generating "living theories" of our own learning, the learning of others, and community and organisational learning at work (Jack Whitehead on video).

8. Deepening levels of authentic collaboration – a central feature of effectiveness and sustainability (Eileen Piggot-Irvine on video).

The three contributions that could be included in this article comprise a small part of the panel discussion. But the lines of enquiry that the three pursue offer rich conceptual and practical insights. Unto themselves, and when melded together in this article, they both open up and weave together new possibilities for action research for sustainable development, problem solving and

social transformation in our ever more complex contemporary world. The first contributor presents the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework of 'Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World'

In today's 'turbulent' world, overpopulation, climate change, intensity of natural disasters, peak oil, nuclear energy concerns, and other issues that raise concern about the future of humankind on earth, have projected 'sustainability' into common conversation. Awareness has been heightened that achieving outcomes is one thing, and sustainability – capacity to maintain the outcome – is quite another and is even more important, certainly for continued wellbeing. In this new paradigm and theoretical framework, the following concepts are important and need discussion:

- Action research (AR)

- Sustainable development (SD)

- Turbulent world

- AR for SD in a turbulent world

- Action leadership

Action Research (AR)

There are as many definitions of AR as there are AR advocates. So we leave the task to you, the reader, to reflect on and continue to develop your own definition and interpretation of AR and its various derivatives and cousins (cf. the main works in the literature) including:

- *AL – Action learning* (Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010; McGill & Brockbank, 2004; Donnenberg, 1999; Marquardt, 1999; Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Pedler, 1997; 2008; Mumford, 1997; Revans, 1982; 1991)

- *ALAR* – the integration of action learning and action research (Sankaran, Dick, Passfield & Swepson, 2001; Speedy, 2003; Zuber-Skerritt, 2009)

- *PAR* – participatory action research (Fals Borda, 1998; 2001; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; McIntyre, 2008)

- *Action science* (Argyris, Putman & Smith, 1985; Aryris & Schön, 1989; Raelin, 1997)

- *AI* – appreciative enquiry (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros & Jacqueline, 2008; Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2008; Reed, 2007)

- *PALAR* – the integration of participatory action learning and action research as *action leadership* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; 2012).

Sustainable Development (SD)

As with AR, there are many definitions of SD, but the most frequently quoted definition is from the so-called Brundtland Report produced by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987): "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/sd.html). The Report called for greater international cooperation to improve global environmental, economic and social sustainability; and it stressed that environmental problems are closely tied to problems of economic and social inequality.

Approaching development in a sustainable way means meeting the needs of current and future generations by balancing the three major target dimensions: economic efficiency, social justice and environmental responsibility. These three areas of concern – economy, society and environment – have frequently been

illustrated in various models/schemes of sustainable development at the confluence of the three constituent parts, as suggested here in Figure 1.[1]
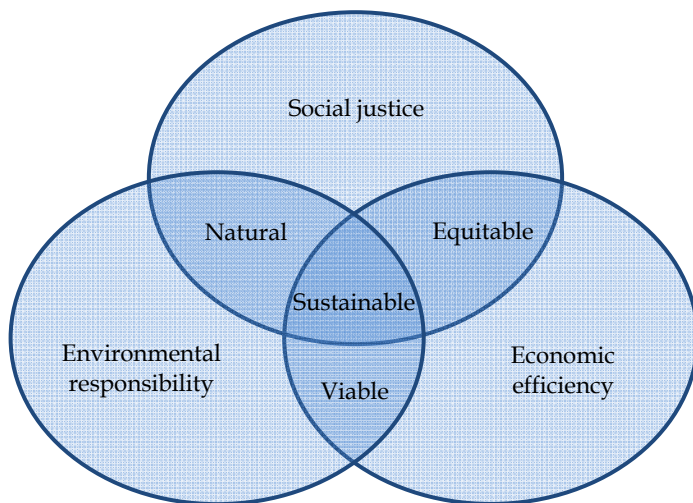

Figure 1   Main dimensions of sustainable development

None of the three dimensions in Figure 1 can be achieved at the expense of any other; they are all equally important. For example, economic development can be sustained only if there are healthy ecosystems and well-trained people. The goals and results of combined (1) economic development and social justice should be *equitable* (although this could also apply to economic development, e.g., equal access to potable water, clean air, food, health services and education); (2) social justice and environmental responsibility should be *natural*, i.e., adhering to universal laws of nature and

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humanity in a balance of governance through government and citizen initiative; and (3) environmental responsibility and economic development should be *viable* for both (environmental responsibility and economic development) and for all.

Turbulent World

Today's turbulent world is characterised by an increase in:

- Natural and human-induced disasters: floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, bushfires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, rising sea levels, etc.;

- Overpopulation, involuntary population migration;

- Militarisation and its expression in war;

- Global financial crises – and more generally, as Bob Dick argues in his contribution to this article:

- Globalisation;

- Growth in technology and artificial intelligence; and

- Communication technologies and the Internet.

Turbulence is discussed in more detail in the book. (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, pp. 15, 215–216 and throughout)

Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World

The democratic values of collaboration and participation continue to be vital principles of action research for sustainable development in this turbulent world. But how can this be achieved?

As I stated earlier (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011):

> We need to explore further possibilities for 'true democracy' through active participation. We need to

create multiple relationships locally and globally with social spaces where we can engage with, and come to value and respect, one another and the group as a whole despite our differences in culture, religion, race, class, sexual orientation, age, life experience, endowment and world view. I argue that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) presents effective ways to achieve such outcomes. I also argue that creating a synergy between ancient (e.g., Greek and Indigenous) and contemporary dialogue and practices provides great potential for enabling us in the 21st century to share our collective wisdom in the interest of the collective 'good'. (p. 4)

With reference to Figure 2, *democratic values*, openness and respect for different beliefs and worldviews can lead to *wisdom*, especially if based on a balanced integration of history, present conditions and future vision. This wisdom must be extended to *creativity and innovation* in order to achieve the reformation and transformation of the *status quo* into a new global society that is tolerant, democratic, loving, sharing and caring – a society that is sensitised to the philosophies of non-government organisations (NGOs), to the politics of uniting nations, to the fair and equitable distribution of wealth, and to responsible environmental management. Action research is central in this conceptual framework as shown in Figure 2.[2]

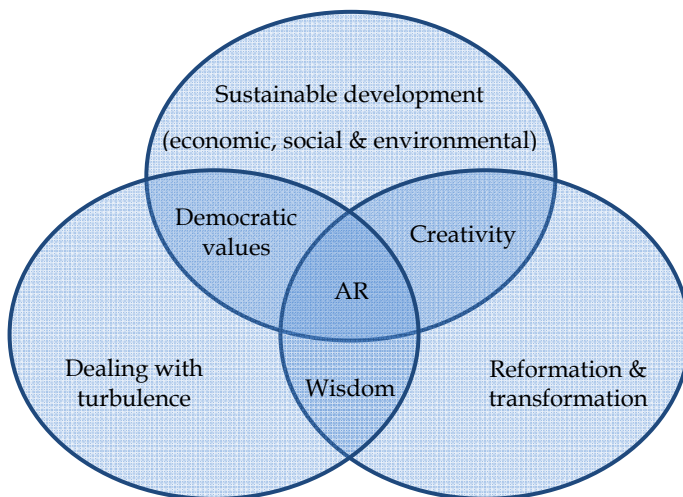[2]   See footnote 1 (p. 190).

Figure 2   Action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world through reformation and transformation.

Transformation takes place in the global society through transformed individuals, groups and activists (or action leaders) "when they agree to work together to make their own social practices more just, rational, coherent, sustainable and satisfying for all those involved and affected" (McTaggart, 2012, p. 107).

Action leadership

In my recent book (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) I argued that the present time of radical change calls for profound rethinking of ways to improve how people and organisations learn, and thus their capacity to engage critically and constructively with the complex issues challenging society at all levels. I suggested that:

> … action leadership is a solution to the increasing neo-liberalism in the form of bureaucratization, managerial control and normative regulation systems in many organizations and governments around the world. It is a

hope for a humanist renaissance or revolution of people power and self-directed actualization of a just and equal society in a global community; and a more effective, sustainable, better world for future generations than a world of competition, rationality, control, technical efficiency (rather than effectiveness) and managerialism. This managerialism upholds the belief in, or reliance on, the use of professional managers in administering a nation, an organization or section thereof and the belief that organizations have more similarities than differences and can be optimized by the application of generic [management](#) skills and theory. Action leadership does not rely on such managerialism, but is more flexible, responsive to change, and innovative in solving problems. Action leaders are experienced, wise and other-centred rather than self-centred. (p. 231)

Action leadership is conceived as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) emerging from group collaboration, using PALAR and coaching for leadership development. It is a creative, innovative, collaborative and self-developed way to lead, based on the democratic values of freedom, equality, inclusion and self-realisation. It takes responsibility for, not control over, people through networking and fostering human energy and self-confidence towards a holistic outcome that benefits the common interest.

Bob Dick calls this type of leadership 'facilitative action leadership' as he explains in the next section.

Facilitative Action Leadership and More Flexible Approaches to Addressing "Wicked" Problems in an Uncertain and Complex World

Two trends are acting to increase the turbulence in the world, with a third trend emerging from their conjunction. These trends are set

to create an environment that favours action research as a methodology and mindset, and facilitative leadership as a preferred leadership style.

The first trend is the continuing *growth in technology and artificial intelligence*. I have in my pocket at the moment a smart phone, actually a small computer. Half a century ago, a computer with far less computing power would occupy a large room. Another room would be required for its air conditioning. Growth in computing power is expected to continue. Some forecasts predict that by mid-century, artificial intelligence will exceed human intelligence. The IBM super-computer Deep Blue has already defeated the Russian chess master Garry Kasparov.

Globalisation is the second trend. With the entire globe as market, we are increasingly affected by events elsewhere. International corporations, with almost no global governance to constrain them, can reach out to influence governments and depose presidents and prime ministers.

At the intersection of these two trends sit *communication technologies* and their foster child *the Internet*. I can conduct a real-time conversation with a group of people scattered across most of the globe's continents. People, everywhere, are potentially interconnected. Their influence and shared leadership, though still mostly latent, can now begin to counter the power of governments and of corporations.

In the past, bureaucratic structures operated efficiently, or efficiently enough. Traditional research methods, with randomised control trials as the exemplar, accumulated knowledge very effectively. Technology advanced, bureaucracy prospered, globalisation occurred, and the Internet grew. Command and control leadership was common because – among other reasons – it worked most of the time. These approaches thrive on stability. Now times are changing. As turbulence increases they function less well unless complemented by other approaches.

It is not that a previously stable world has suddenly become unstable. Times of relative stability have always been punctuated by times of change. There have always been complex situations in which traditional methods lose some of their effectiveness. People adapt such methods so they continue to function by finding ways of stabilising the situation or deflecting the instability elsewhere.

For example, at all levels most education is traditional. It functions by maintaining control, regimenting behaviour and controlling idiosyncrasy. Yet every class is to some extent unique, as is every person in it. When I became an academic, being responsive to that uniqueness required me to enter into a partnership with class members. I used my initial leadership to facilitate shared leadership by all of us. We designed and managed the class collaboratively. Treading new ground, we used intelligent trial and error to proceed. In other words, we practised action research.
There was much about action research that served us well. Its collaborative nature fitted our partnership. It allowed us to respond flexibly to the unexpected. By integrating research and action it supported our understanding and our achievements.

There will continue to be situations in which traditional approaches work well. Some research situations will continue to suit fully experimental methods. In some organisational environments bureaucracy will be the appropriate structure. Command and control styles of leadership will still sometimes be indicated.

There are growing numbers of situations, however, where turbulence is more common than stability. Increasingly there will be complex situations where almost everything affects almost everything else, and causal assumptions will fail. Action research and its facilitative leadership style will then offer effective and satisfying ways of proceeding.

Bob Dick's sentiment and hope are reiterated by Lesley Wood in the next section. Invited to comment on the book, Lesley draws attention to the book's contribution to sustainable social transformation, and the inclusional philosophy that the book embodies. Here she chooses to highlight some of the most important messages of hope that have implications for researchers who wish to contribute to *sustainable social transformation*.

Action Research for Social Transformation

Although we are at the mercy of greater environmental, political and economic forces; although life is unpredictable, unjust, unequal, and unpleasant for the majority of people in the world, we, as researchers, can *contribute to social change* and improvement through employing participatory action learning methodologies. My own context is in education in a country where the very systems that are supposed to help develop education are characterised by inefficiency, corruption, mishandling of budgets and general failure in the area of service delivery. However, action research enables us to work *with* communities to mobilise them to harness their transformative potential and become agents of their own social change. As Norbert Platz emphatically states in his review of the book, "We need not be victims"; action research provides us with tools to work collaboratively with even the most marginalised of communities.

The dialogical forms of logic that underpin action research lead us to accept that we can succeed only if we *work with* and *learn from others*. Action research places people at the centre of any enquiry and thus constrains us to embody values such as respect for diversity, person-centredness and compassion for our fellow human beings. Values that promote the social good can thus be transformed from rhetoric to reality, if we hold them up as 'living standards of judgement' (Whitehead, 1989) to validate our research. Furthermore, the critical, emancipatory paradigm that informs the ontology and epistemology of action research unleashes the

capacity of people to think critically about how they can free themselves from dominating forces and forge their own identities as agents of change in the interests of society. History has taught many of us that the preservation of hard boundaries between philosophies, religions and races causes unending strife. The relational, dialogical thinking underpinning action research allows us to blur distinct borders and find points of agreement and compromise that can promote harmony and collaboration.

This book embodies the *inclusional philosophy* of action research. In many instances action research has been divided into camps – for example, values based self-study approach versus an outsider, researcher as facilitator approach of participatory action research. The different understandings of AR have been melded together here by the idea of sustainability. The epistemology, ontology and axiology of all forms of action research are similar – they all aim to transform society through transforming individuals and communities. As action learning is foregrounded as part of action research, the individual learning of action leaders becomes central to the process of change – the 'I' is thus becoming an integral part of any action research genre, and this is what makes change more likely to be sustainable. The transformative potential of people holding themselves accountable, through critical self-reflection, for how their learning and actions affect their spheres of influence, is infinite – the accumulative effect of personal commitment to lifelong learning makes sustainable improvement inevitable.

This book is a scholarly contribution by renowned scholars and fills a gap in the literature at a particularly timely moment. It places AR as a vehicle for exploring and improving problems that beset this socially, economically and ecologically threatened world. The 'golden thread' of commitment to quality-of-life enhancing values, authentic participation, and people-centredness illustrates the flexibility, resilience and adaptability of AR to transverse disciplinary boundaries. As Mary Brydon-Millar says, it offers both generative theoretical frameworks and concrete strategies for using

AR. It contributes to the humanising of research, something that is much needed in today's world where traditional aspects of community and caring have been eroded.

Conclusion

The primary aim of this article has been to reflect on and discuss aspects of the book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* and to bring new insights from the panel discussion at the 2012 ALARA Conference into published form to enhance their capacity to contribute to knowledge creation. Each co-author has focused on a specific area/topic: Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt on the conceptual framework of the book and article; Bob Dick on 'facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing "wicked" problems in an uncertain and complex world'; and Lesley Wood on 'action research for sustainable social transformation'. The overall message of this article is that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) and facilitative action leadership are effective and proven methods for sustainable development in our turbulent world in the 21st century.

Although all three co-authors have substantial experience and evidence for this message, the scope of the article has limited us to producing a conceptual, rather than a research paper. In concluding this paper we recognise as useful a few examples from a South African leadership development program on community engagement that can be summarised by "PALAR works!", as one participant cheered. Program participants offered many accounts of how "PALAR has become a way of life" for them. To quote a few:

- "PALAR has provided me with a way of making my engagement with the community human";

- "A vibrant community of practice has emerged";

- "The PALAR process results in a high degree of personal growth"; and

- "A high level of motivation and enthusiasm".

Other researchers and practitioners are encouraged to test our ideas in their own environment to further develop knowledge for their own needs and purposes. In this way we work together to reap the benefits for, and social transformation of, local communities and organisations. Such creation and passage of knowledge works towards the type of sustainable development so urgently needed in our turbulent world of the twenty-first century.

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ALARA membership information and article submissions

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The ALAR Journal is available to members of the Action Learning, Action Research Association Inc (ALARA). Members obtain access to two issues of the ALAR Journal per year.

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ALARA invites organisational memberships – including Affiliates. Details are on our membership link on our website

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Please visit our web page: www.alara.net.au

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Journal submissions criteria and review process

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While ALARj promotes established practice and related discourse, new and first-time authors are also encouraged to submit articles. ALARj also encourages unconventional approaches to reflecting on practice including poetry, artworks and other forms of creative expression that can in some instances progress the field more appropriately than academic forms of writing.

Submissions are uploaded to our Open Journal System (OJS) editing and publication site.

The reviewers use the OJS system to send you feedback within a 2-3 month period. You will receive emails at each stage of the process with feedback, and if needed, instructions included in the email about how to make revisions and resubmit.

The journal is published electronically on the OJS website.

EBSCO and InformIT also publish the journal commercially for worldwide access, and pdf or printed versions can be purchased from Sydney University Press at http://fmx01.ucc.usyd.edu.au/jspcart/cart/Category.jsp?nParentID=42

For further information about submitting to the ALAR Journal, please see the submission guidelines on ALARA's web site www.alara.net.au/publications/guidelines.

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP FORM

This form is for the use of individuals wishing to join ALARA Inc
Please complete all fields

I wish to apply for Individual Membership of ALARA

Name		
Title	Given Name	Family Name

Residential Address:

Town / City	Postcode / Zip:	Country:

Postal Address	Town / City

Postcode/Zip:	State	Country

Telephone		Mobile Telephone	
Country Code	Telephone Number	Country Code	Mobile Number

Email	Experience (Please tick most relevant)
	No experience yet 1 – 5 years' experience
	More than 5 years' experience

Interests (Please tick all relevant)

Education	Community / Social Justice	Gender Issues
Health	Indigenous Issues	Organisational Development

Are you eligible for a concessional membership fee? If you are a student, pensioner or individual earning less than $AU 20,000 per annum then you can apply for the concessional membership fee.

Do you belong to an organisation that is an Organisational Member of ALARA Inc? If you are a member of such an organisation, you can apply for the reduced membership fee. If you are uncertain if your organisation is an Organisational Member, please pay the full fee and enter "Uncertain" in the Organisation's Name box below. We will advise you if a discount is available and refund the difference.

Annual Membership Fees (Please select one type of membership)

☐ **$AU 145.00** Full membership fee

☐ **$AU 95.00** Concessional membership fee (see above)

☐ **$AU 72.50** Reduced membership fee, as I belong to an Organisational Member of ALARA: Organisation's Name:

By submitting this membership form, I acknowledge that I have read, understood and accept ALARA's Privacy Policy (http://www.alara.net.au/privacy)

We offer a range of payment options. Details are provided on the Tax Invoice that we will send to you on receipt of your membership application

Remember: If you want to join and pay online, just go to http://www.alara.net.au/alara_payments
Alternatively, please return the completed form to us:

By post to:	PO Box 1748 TOOWONG
	Queensland 4066 AUSTRALIA
By FAX to:	+ 61 (7) 3342 1669
BY email to:	finance@alara.net.au

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

Please see ALARA's web site www.alara.net.au for an organisational membership application form.

ALARA is a strategic network of people interested or involved in using action learning or action research to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses.

ALARA's vision is that action learning and action research will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society.