

**EDITORIAL**

## **Why action research?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Members of the editorial board of *Action Research* responded to the question, 'Why action research?' Based on their responses and the authors' own experiences as action researchers, this article examines common themes and commitments among action researchers as well as exploring areas of disagreement and important avenues for future exploration. We also use this opportunity to welcome readers of this new journal and to introduce them to members of the editorial board.

### **KEY WORDS**

- action research
- biography
- commitment
- ethics/morality
- social change

Welcome! The launch of this new journal marks an important achievement for all of us who identify ourselves as action researchers. We hope that this journal will serve, not only as a forum for the presentation of important innovations in the theory and practice of action research, but as an open invitation to new scholars and activists. For the inaugural issue, we have prepared this article to serve two purposes. The first is to present some of the major issues and tensions currently under discussion by those of us committed to the practice of action research. You will see these questions repeatedly discussed, debated, and disagreed about in the pages of this journal. Our intention here is to begin to identify some of these issues and to acknowledge both areas of commonality and of controversy among action researchers.

Our second purpose is to introduce readers of *Action Research* to members of the editorial board. Action research is not an impersonal practice and we want you to know who we are, how we came to the practice of action research, and what we stand for, both individually, and as a community. This article is built on responses from members of the editorial board to the following query:

We'd like your thoughts on the 'Why?' question. Why do you choose to do action research? What brought you to this practice? What keeps you involved? Do you have particular stories that illustrate why you practice action research? What issues, values, experiences, personal characteristics or other factors underlie your commitment to action research and shape your practice?

We (Mary, Davydd and Pat) have taken the responses to that query, including our own, and have identified some of the themes and concerns expressed by our colleagues, as well as some of the unspoken issues we feel need to be addressed if the practice of action research is to fulfill our hope for it to become a force for social change both within and beyond academic settings. We are grateful to all of those who were able to respond. We wish to acknowledge that, in attempting to create this brief overview, we have not done justice to the diversity of experience and the depth of insight reflected in the comments submitted to us by our colleagues. For this we apologize in advance and we hope that you, our readers, will be inspired, intrigued or irritated enough by what you find here to seek out additional works by these scholars.

## **Defining action research**

Action research, as defined by Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, is:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit

of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (2001, p. 1)

Action research has a complex history because it is not a single academic discipline but an approach to research that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields. There are strong elements of action research in the work of John Dewey, both in his philosophical work and in his studies and experiments in education. Action research perspectives can be found in the early labor-organizing traditions both in the US and Europe, in the Catholic Action movement and in liberation theology. Kurt Lewin brought an action research perspective to the US in the 1940s and succeeded for a time in making the notion of collaborative research with stakeholders with a liberating intent a central interest of a broad range of social scientists. The anthropologist, Sol Tax, founded what he called ‘action anthropology’ to promote both collaboration with local stakeholders and democratization processes. The Tavistock Institute for Human Relations supported action research efforts combining the work of British, Norwegians, and Australians on work in both the UK and Scandinavia. This work has spread to Sweden, Denmark and Germany. Myles Horton and his collaborators founded Highlander in Tennessee to promote social justice, civil rights, and democracy. Paulo Freire, Budd Hall, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Orlando Fals-Borda and others developed and promoted an action research approach to oppression and institutional change. Chris Argyris, Donald Schön, Reg Revans, William Torbert, Peter Reason and John Heron promoted this kind of work in a wide variety of organizations, ranging from private sector companies to public authorities.

As disparate as these traditions are, what links them is the key question of how we go about generating knowledge that is both valid and vital to the well-being of individuals, communities, and for the promotion of larger-scale democratic social change. Action research challenges the claims of a positivistic view of knowledge which holds that in order to be credible, research must remain objective and value-free. Instead, we embrace the notion of knowledge as socially constructed and, recognizing that all research is embedded within a system of values and promotes some model of human interaction, we commit ourselves to a form of research which challenges unjust and undemocratic economic, social and political systems and practices.

Action research is a work in progress. As readers of this journal will discover, there are still many unanswered questions and many unresolved debates. We invite you to join us and the many action research practitioners throughout the world in shaping our practice, in defining our goals, in articulating the theoretical frameworks to support our work and in discovering ways in which our shared commitment to social justice can be realized.

## The journey to action research

The members of the editorial board reflect the diverse fields in which action research has begun to have an influence, among them organization development, anthropology, education, economics, psychology, sociology, and management. From the descriptions of the journey to action research we received from editorial board members, it appears that many of us have one thing in common – our profound dissatisfaction with where we were.<sup>2</sup> As Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt observed,

I was alone, but deep inside I could not accept that majority views must be right, accepted or adhered to simply because of their majority status. I recognised that we should not leave a paradigm unchallenged simply because it is dominant. (Zuber-Skerritt and Farquhar, 2002, p. 103)

Acting from this sense of dissatisfaction, we began our search for a new research practice. But the road to action research was not clearly marked, especially for those of us who have pioneered the re-emergence of this approach. Reflecting on her entry into participatory action research over 35 years ago, Marja-Liisa Swantz recalls, ‘I had no knowledge or training in action research and the participatory method I knew about was the anthropological participant observation. I found it untenable. I mingled in the affairs of the community in many and varied ways.’ Similarly, Werner Fricke notes, ‘I had been studying economics and sociology at several German universities. There was never a word about action research at the university; it was unknown in German academia in the late sixties and seventies even more than it is today.’ Bob Dick’s experience, or a variation on the theme, is also familiar to many of us, ‘my early training was as an experimental psychologist. I wasn’t given even a hint of the existence of action research.’

Fortunately, tenacity is also something of a commonality. Bob goes on to recall that, ‘some colleagues mentioned something called action research. Others tried to dissuade me from even looking at it. “Not much action, and not much research”, was how one of them characterized it. That was reason enough to examine it for myself.’ Shankar Sankaran describes a similar experience and acknowledges that following his first encounter with action research he ‘came away very puzzled. Most of us were positivists brought up with a scientific background.’ But further reading of action research brought him back to his childhood heroes, ‘Gandhi and Nehru, whose democratic principles I admired a lot.’ Shankar recalls how, ‘reading Lewin’s papers and hearing about some of the AR stories kindled the free spirit that I had when I was younger although I was much poorer. I started feeling more comfortable about action research.’

The struggle for congruency between our theories and practices is another commonality among action researchers. Bill Torbert says it clearly – our practice ‘aims toward greater congruity between the values one espouses and the values one enacts’. Pat Maguire recalls how that very struggle in the early 1980s brought

her and others at the Center for International Education to participatory action research. ‘We realized that our approaches to research and evaluation were incongruent with the values of the empowering, non-formal education we espoused in our work outside the academy.’ After changing from being a laboratory-based experimental psychologist to an educator, Bob Dick also felt the tension of incongruity, ‘The research methods I knew well didn’t fit my new situation. Either I found something else or I abandoned research altogether.’

In describing their journeys to action research members of the editorial board cite a variety of influences, including Kurt Lewin, Paulo Freire, Thomas Pettigrew, Chris Argyris, Gregory Bateson and John Dewey. But as important as these fellow scholars have been, it is also clear that for many of us early political activity, community development efforts and the inspiration of the people we’ve met through these experiences have been the real impetus behind our dedication to this work. Werner Fricke, for example, describes taking part in an investigation of Nazi-era judges in post-war West Germany; Victor Friedman recalls his work as a young scholar in the Jewish community on an island off the coast of Tunisia; Olav Eikeland relates his experience in a progressive high school; and L. David Brown writes of his time as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. These experiences were pivotal in their development as action researchers. Through such experiences many of us reached the same conclusion as Robin McTaggart. ‘What really is the purpose of social research? The answer to this question to me now is quite straightforward: the improvement of social practice.’

L. David Brown’s description of the journey captures what many of us seem to feel.

I believe that many events in my work and life have been a matter of luck or accident. But I am also aware of several occasions on which I explicitly made choices to step off the obvious path, and do something that others thought odd or worse. . . . I have come to think of these events as ‘detours’ from the obvious career paths stretching before me. Frequently these detours have become the main road for me. There are obvious costs to such detours. Other choices might have made me richer, more influential, more famous, more productive, and so on. But I like what I am doing, even though the path has involved a lot of wandering through uncharted territory.

## **A shared commitment to democratic social change**

Action research rejects the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation in favor of an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice. John Shotter states it quite succinctly, ‘research into our ways of life cannot be conducted in the same, value-free way as in the natural sciences.’

David Coghlan, describing the impact of Kurt Lewin’s work on his practice, describes a basic tenet of action research, ‘the powerful notion that human sys-

tems could only be understood and changed if one involved the members of the system in the inquiry process itself.

A key value shared by action researchers, then, is this abiding respect for people's knowledge and for their ability to understand and address the issues confronting them and their communities. Ernie Stringer reflects this position when he suggests that our task should be to:

provide people with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles. The people, we knew, not the experts, should be the ones to determine the nature and operation of the things that affected their lives.

As Elizabeth Kasl suggests in writing with Lyle Yorks, it is by working in collaboration with others that we are able to achieve the most. They describe how in their own community-based work, the participants 'grew to appreciate how their interrelatedness created a power greater than a sum of individual powers' (2002, p. 16).

Working collaboratively with others leads not only to community and organizational changes, but also to personal changes in the action researcher. As action researchers reflect on their experiences, they acknowledge being profoundly changed by those experiences. Marja-Liisa Swantz recalls a project with 50 students at the University of Dar Es Salaam that engaged student-researchers directly with village youth and women cleaners.

In each case the researchers became involved in the problems of the people concerned over a period of time. The research changed the attitudes of the students radically and made the research mode a thorough educational process for the villagers, students, and myself as a scholar.

Similarly, Elizabeth Kasl wrote, 'From my experience as a participatory research methods teacher and dissertation chair, I have second hand experience of witnessing the transformative power of participatory processes as launched by students in course practicum projects and dissertation work.'

Action research, according to Werner Fricke, is:

empathy and listening while meeting the other, it is a commitment to basic values like human creativity and democratic participation, it is based on the perception of social reality as a continuing process with individuals being subjects of their history and the social contexts they are dependent on.

He goes on to insist, we 'cannot (and must not) avoid values and personal commitment'.

These values require action. Knowledge comes from doing. Action researchers feel compelled to act collectively on and with that knowledge. Hilary Bradbury urges, 'Action research must draw power from the premises of pragmatism, that belief that we can know through doing.' She continues, 'I realize I

am particularly comfortable with knowing through doing, as much, if not more so, than knowing through conceptualization.’ Robin McTaggart reflects this commitment to action in describing the difference between action research and other forms of inquiry, ‘the crucial difference lies in the commitment of action researchers to bring about change as part of the research act. Fundamental to action research is the idea that the social world can only be understood by trying to change it.’ Pat Maguire wrote, ‘I stay involved with action research because all the theorizing in the world, feminist or otherwise, is of little use without the doing. And action researchers are doers.’

A respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action, these are the basic values which underlie our common practice as action researchers. Ian Hughes sums up how many of us seem to feel:

I choose action research because I have a long standing commitment to developing more effective strategies and methods to promote social justice. . . . I choose action research because I believe in old fashioned virtues like compassion and truth. I know this sounds corny, but it is real.

## **The integration of theory and practice**

Many of us cite Kurt Lewin, who once observed, ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ (1951, p. 169), as a major influence on our work. But action research goes beyond the notion that theory can inform practice, to a recognition that theory can and should be generated through practice, and, as the earlier discussion of values would suggest, that theory is really only useful insofar as it is put in the service of a practice focused on achieving positive social change.

Werner Fricke recalls that his ‘entrance was research praxis, not theory’. We think many action researchers would have to admit that they came to theory largely as a way of justifying what they knew was correct to begin with; to legitimize a politically informed and effective form of knowledge generated through experience. We were able to justify our work as academics through reference to theoretical frameworks challenging the dominant positivistic worldview of the social sciences. Critical theory in particular made much of our work possible and we draw upon many of the more recent theoretical frameworks to provide new perspectives on our work. As Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt notes, theory provided the insights needed for ‘effective intellectual argument’.

But having embraced critical theory, or feminism, or pragmatism, we began to discover the ability of theory to frame issues of power and identity; to suggest strategies for action and explanations for outcomes which had earlier left us puzzled; to provide structures within which our work could be better understood

and our practice improved. Theory provided a grounding for our attempts to take the next step. L. David Brown describes his experience of trying to bring together community activists and business leaders. After his first efforts ended in a weary stalemate, Brown reconceptualized the process in terms of intergroup tensions and power differences. The success of this second project 'confirmed that both practice and theory could benefit from combining action and research'.

Wrestling with this connection between theory and practice can provide an intellectual challenge as well. Ernie Stringer notes that action research,

provides the impetus for me to continue to explore the academic and intellectual roots of this tradition, enabling me to seek affirmation for my work in the post-modern, feminist and critical theories that are, for me, the most significant discourse in the academic world I inhabit.

In some cases, theory has led not only to a critique of conventional research practices, but to a much needed re-examination of our own practice. As Pat Maguire recalls:

the juxtaposition of everyday activism in the women's movement with theorizing action research led me to feminist critiques of traditional social science research as well as feminist critiques of international development assistance. It didn't take long to superimpose feminist critiques on participatory action research.

There is much work left to be done in adequately articulating strong theoretical foundations for our work as action researchers. Olav Eikeland notes, 'I think most action research doesn't understand itself in adequate ways, which often, but not always, means that action researchers have better practices than theoretical self-understandings.'

There is also work to be done in articulating inclusive theoretical foundations that build more extensively on indigenous knowledge systems (see for example Hermes, 1999; Smith, 1999), feminist theories (Brydon-Miller, Maguire & McIntyre, in press; Morawski, 2001), postcolonial (Bhabha, 1994; McClintock, Mufti & Shohat, 1997) or critical race theories (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Parker, Deyhle & Villenas, 1999). It is our hope that this journal may provide a forum for such conversations regarding theory, and in doing so, might help to advance both the theory and practice of action research.

## **Relationships for learning and action**

Some contributors indicated that during their professional training at university, they never heard of action research. Or, as Bob Dick's earlier comment demonstrates, if they did hear of action research, they were discouraged from exploring it. Others note that they were discouraged as scholars-in-training from combining

research and action. Mary Brydon-Miller wrote, 'There are those who say that direct action is not, nor should be, the responsibility of social scientists.' She continues, 'one graduate school advisor told me, "You can't mix your politics and your psychology."' To which she responded, 'If I have to choose one, I'll choose my politics.' Fortunately, action research provided a way to preserve both while losing the advisor.

Still others note that their university-based doctoral training proved inadequate for the questions they grappled with and the challenges they faced in the field. Through his PhD studies, Ernie Stringer 'sought to understand how teachers and school systems could provide appropriate and successful educational experiences for Aboriginal children'. He continues, 'By the early eighties, I came to realize that all my expertise, the now diverse array of quantitative and qualitative research tools I now had at my disposal, would fail to provide what I was seeking.'

Despite the absence of action research from university curricula or faculty discouragement, many of the editorial board contributors did indeed learn about action research through other university faculty or students, as well as through readings, and classes. It was during McTaggart's move from a teachers college to a university setting, Deakin, that he was introduced to action through work with Stephen Kemmis. In graduate school, Hilary Bradbury was introduced to action research concepts by Bill Torbert, while Mary Brydon-Miller was 'rescued from a life of positivism' by Peter Park. Despite Shankar Sankaran's 'puzzlement' after his initial introduction to action research in his PhD program, he went on to complete an action research doctorate supervised by Bob Dick and Alan Davies. Shankar recalls, 'My emancipatory spirit had been awakened and I started feeling restless after I finished my doctorate. My world had been changed and I was looking at it from different eyes.'

Indeed one of the themes that emerged from these contributions is how critical it is for us to create and sustain spaces in universities and training institutes through which we support, nurture, and challenge action researchers. Through collegial persistence over the years, many of the members of the editorial board have contributed energetically to the development of university-based action research programs or networks. These include such action research programs or networks as: Deakin University School of Education; University of Bath Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice; the Cornell Participatory Action Research Network; Participatory Research in Asia; Southern Cross Institute of Action Research; Case Western Reserve Department of Organizational Behavior; the Leadership for Change executive program at Boston College (which brings together faculty from the Lynch School of Education, the Carroll School of Management, and the Sociology Department); Boston University School of Management; Griffith University; the University of Sydney; and research groups such as Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM); the UK-based Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN); the New

Zealand Action Research Network (NZARN); and the newly formed US-based Community-based Research Network.

Our stories indicate that the mentoring and collegial sharing that many of us have enjoyed with others has been crucial to our development as action researchers and as human beings passionately concerned with injustices and inequities. To paraphrase Elizabeth Kasl and Lyle York, we have developed and learned ‘in relationship’. Many of us came to action research through our work with indigenous people – Australian Aboriginals, American Indians, African villagers – or those marginalized in more industrialized nations, such as the elderly, people with disabilities and factory workers. Yet our voices as editorial board members are disproportionately white, male and from industrialized nations. In her response to the query which launched this article, Mary Brydon-Miller quoted Wildman and Davis, ‘. . . to end subordination, one must first recognize privilege’ (1996, p. 20).

Essentially, we editorial board members are a privileged group, functioning in a gate-keeping capacity both as editors and in our university and institutional affiliations. But our commitment to action research requires us, collectively and individually, to reach and push beyond our comfort zones to truly diversify the editorial board, in each volume of this journal, in our institutions, and in our networks, formal and informal. We hope to turn the conventional gate-keeping function into a door-opening function and to do so in a collaborative spirit with those who are disseminating action research through other journals and book series.<sup>3</sup> While we started out this article with an invitation and hope that new action researchers would ‘join us’, it can certainly be intimidating to try to join an ongoing network of academics and practitioners who have enjoyed various relationships with each other over the years. Our challenge is to reach out.

Similarly, our challenge is to diversify the knowledge base of the field that gets shared with newcomers. Editorial board member Yoland Wadsworth, current President of ALARPM, recently came across an article that gave an overview of action research. Skipping down to the reference list, which serves to codify the legitimate knowledge of action research, she was appalled to find the work of so few women action researchers. Yoland noted, ‘the life work of feminist and women action researchers is being disappeared before our eyes’ (personal communication). While many contributors to this article noted the influence of pioneering ‘fellow’ action researchers, we have a collective responsibility to introduce the next generation of action researchers, indeed ourselves, to the work of the action researchers such as Alice McInyre, Ella Bell, M. Brinton Lykes, Yoland Wadsworth, Judi Marshall, Michele Fine, Patti Lather, Ortrun Zuber-Skerrit, Jean King, Penny Barnett, Jan Barnsley and Diana Ellis, Francesca Cancian, Irene Guijt and Meera Kaul Shah, Korrie De Koning and Marion Martin, Renu Khanna, Susan Noffke and Marie Brennan, Britt-Marie Berge and Hildur Ve, Sandra Hollingsworth, Patricia Hill Collins, Colleen Reid, Marie

Mies, and Marja-Liisa Swantz, who is credited with coining the term ‘participatory research’. There are so many others.

## Action researchers as educators

In our roles as academics or facilitators, many of us have found that the road to action research also required changes in our teaching practices. Ernie Stringer notes,

Enacting participatory approaches requires me to take quite a different stance to my work. I now realize the necessity to thoughtfully engage in practices that involve changes in relationship, positioning, authority, and knowledge production practices. As a teacher, researcher or professional practitioner, I am a changed person.

Many contributors wrote of the various ways that they incorporate democratic, participatory, and experiential methods into their university action research classes, cognizant of the need for congruency in teaching about action research through active, reflective, and relational practices (David Coghlan, Elizabeth Kasl and Lyle Yorks, Bill Torbert and Dawn Chandler, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Davydd Greenwood). Bob Dick writes about the dialectical relationship between teaching about action research and engaging in action research on our teaching practices. ‘When I began to build regular monitoring and reflection into my university classes, they began to improve noticeably. . . . As my educational skills improved, so did my action research. As my action research was refined, so were my educational skills.’

It’s a good thing that tenacity seems to be a shared trait among action researchers. While action research is enjoying a period of expanded legitimacy, we have to be tenacious in advancing the practices. Although Marja-Liisa Swantz wrote about a Tanzanian project which took place many years ago, the dynamics are similar to those faced in using participatory processes in development contexts today. ‘Ministries and the district offices were not ready to make use of the benefits of the study. It became clear to me that there must be institutional preparedness to act on the basis of the results gained at the community level.’ She continues, ‘I am perplexed that after all the work done with PAR and the evident successes in using it, the main-line social scientists still largely ignore it.’

Werner Fricke, in writing of the isolation experienced trying to advance action research in the German trade unions observes,

We all know the great difficulties action researchers face to bridge the two worlds of theory and praxis, but if they try to avoid these difficulties, they will be reduced to either consultants or academic scientists. In both roles they are missing the social function of action research: to enhance democratic participation and to create public spaces in [the] economy.

## The world of heretics

We all can, and must, do our part to contribute to the goal of achieving greater social justice and each of us brings a unique set of experiences and talents to the task. But even given the diversity of disciplines, locations, and perspectives, there do seem to be certain characteristics common to many of us currently engaged in this practice. For one thing, we're basically a hybrid of scholar/activist in which neither role takes precedence. Our academic work takes place within and is made possible by our political commitments and we draw on our experience as community activists and organizers to inform our scholarship.

In general, we don't do well with boundaries, witness the interdisciplinary nature of our editorial board and the broad range of influences cited by contributors. In addition, as the story of our journeys to action research suggests, on the whole those of us who define ourselves as action researchers are not the world's greatest rule-followers. As Robin McTaggart puts it, 'Welcome to the world of the heretics!'

On the other hand, we do tend to be practical and concerned with achieving real outcomes with real people. Hilary Bradbury speaks for many of us when she notes, 'it's more satisfying for me to help create desired change, rather than merely observe life go by.' L. David Brown suggests how we bridge these two inclinations, 'I learned to be a maverick early, but I like to be a maverick with influence.'

It helps to be patient. Building trust in communities that have every reason to be wary of outsiders and especially of academic outsiders doing research is a long-term project. Jim Kelly describes the 10 years he and his students dedicated to working with African-American community leaders in Chicago on the Developing Communities Project (Kelly, Azelton, Lardon, Mock & Tandon, in press), but the impact of the project on the community and the richness of the insights generated in their work together are testament to the value of such patience.

We also tend to be optimistic. We believe in the possibility of change, 'surprising changes . . . changes that happen unexpectedly, changes that strike us with amazement and wonder', as John Shotter describes it. And we continue to believe in the potential for change, often despite years of fighting battles within our institutions and communities that might deter a less determined soul. We take joy in what we do (mostly) and we even tend to like one another! Ian Hughes observed, 'action researchers are a friendly and supportive community,' and Hilary Bradbury concurs, noting, 'all of my best friends are action researchers.'

## The beauty of chaos

It also helps to be able to handle a certain degree of chaos, uncertainty and messiness. As Victor Friedman put it, it helps to have ‘a preference for learning from experience and especially from engaging uncertainty/complexity’. You have to be willing to be wrong, to trust that other people know their own lives and their own interests better than you do. This comes hard to those of us who have been trained to believe that we are smarter than everyone else.

Russell Ackoff’s (1999) term ‘messes’ sums up one of the ways a great many action researchers differ from their conventional social science colleagues. Messes are complex, multi-dimensional, intractable, dynamic problems that can only be partially addressed and partially resolved. Yet most action researchers have disciplined themselves to believe that messes can be attractive and even exciting. We try not to avoid messy situations despite knowing that we do not have the ‘magic bullet’ because we believe that, together with legitimate community stakeholders, we can do something to improve the situation.

Just how action researchers come to have this way of living in the world is not at all clear. Nearly all of us have conventional disciplinary training built on a Fordist division of intellectual labor, hermetic professional hierarchies and disciplinary peer control systems of ranking and reward. No way of organizing intellectual life could be more antithetical to engagement with messes because messes require the recognition of the limitations and weaknesses of single discipline knowledge systems and methods and engage us in collaboration, not only with other disciplines, but with non-academic partners.

Some of this emerges directly from ethical and political commitments. As convenient as Fordism is, it makes it impossible to address any significant social issue. Those action researchers committed to social change necessarily have to deal with messes; we are forced to follow the problems wherever they take us, and the best among us learn the theories, methods, and processes we need along the way. Whatever our uncertainties, we seem to tolerate them because we are committed to changing the world in some positive way.

Another element of this is a kind of fundamental sociability that shines through in all the contributions from the editorial board members. Many action researchers find joy in being with others, in working passionately in groups, in brainstorming, in struggling together. Through experience, we have learned that it is not reasonable to try to be alone in our work. Again, the contrast with the isolated disciplinary scholastic hero with 20 books, hundreds of articles and a solitary life is sharp.

There is a clear legacy of pragmatism and feminism that helps explain our penchant for messes. As a group, we seem unable to resist ‘embodied’ intellectual practice. We never leave our corporeality; we are engaged in ongoing cycles of reflection and action in which our bodies and ourselves and those of our collabo-

rators are not only present to us but essential to the very process of understanding messes. Pain, joy, fear, bravery, love, rage – all are present in our action research lives.

There may also be a kind of ‘aesthetic’ at work in action research that welcomes complexity, uncertainty, and struggle as energizing and filled with possibility. We seem to tolerate paradoxes and puzzles and to survive them through a sense of their beauty and some kind of sense of humor as well. When non-action research colleagues greet us with fear and hostility, we probably should attribute some of this defensive reaction to their sense that we have a worldview that is too dynamic, too unstable, and too chaotic to be acceptable.

Of course, our community has its share of less dynamic participants. Personal uncertainties, weaknesses in research training, poor writing skills and other defects are also with us and we need to work hard as networks to improve both the quality of action research and the ongoing training of those with a will to improve their own practices.

## **Facing the challenges of change**

Robin McTaggart’s answer to his question, ‘What really is the purpose of social research?’ was ‘the improvement of a social practice’. As action researchers, what are some of the challenges we face in improving our action research practices, individually and collectively?

Perhaps one of the first challenges is tackling and changing or improving the places within which many of us practice. Many action researchers do not have university affiliations. Indeed a few would actively reject them. But on the whole, most editorial board members are affiliated with universities and research institutes. There can be no question that universities are a key institution for teaching about, conducting, and publishing action research. The editorial board’s personal stories are almost always of personal transformation into action researchers after a long period of unsatisfying university training or work. This path does not recommend itself as a way of promoting action research. We cannot be content to permit universities to continue to train most social scientists out of their values and social engagements and then try to convert them later into action researchers. To paraphrase Jill Morawski’s challenge to feminist scientists, our task is to continue to ‘modify the near environment’ (2001, p. 68) in which we conduct our action research, learn, teach, and evaluate our efforts.

We cannot do this from a position of arrogance and, unfortunately, in response to the arrogance of the disengaged positivists, against whom we routinely rail, we often place ourselves on a moral high ground that blocks genuine and direct dialogue with the very colleagues we should be challenging.

Given this, our collective near silence on universities as institutions and why action research has a hard time prospering in them is concerning.<sup>4</sup> We should take up the challenge to develop and articulate an analysis of the dynamics that make universities as institutions behave as they do. Only then can we develop practical strategies and mechanisms for transforming universities into real learning institutions at the service of the communities in which they are situated.

This means adopting conscious pedagogies of action research and furthering the crisis into which the conventional social sciences have fallen. At present, abstract economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology are largely socially disengaged and self-referential. While they are being supplanted by management studies, organizational behavior, human resource management, program evaluation, and so on – all fields with more regular extra-university social contacts – this is not leading to the re-emergence of action research. Rather, the ‘new’ social sciences are being looked at by university administrations as entrepreneurial centers of research revenue generation and the ‘old’ social sciences are losing ground to them. At the end of the day, the corporate entrepreneurial university of the 21st century will certainly be more socially connected but its connection is likely to be mainly through competition in the neo-liberal global market. Action research, with its multi-college, multi-disciplinary, critical view, may be the last source of resistance to this process and the source of a renewed university–society relationship. But this will only happen if we take on the universities as they are. It is one thing to be a ‘heretic’ and another thing to accept this as a desirable status for action research.

Davydd vividly remembers our late friend and colleague, Donald Schön, at the end of a wonderful workshop day in which all had outdone themselves being smart and collaborative, saying, ‘If we are so smart, why did action research die in universities?’ He went on to say that he did not want to be right and defeated again.

To live up to Don’s challenge, however, requires an effort that most action researchers in a position to do so are not yet making – beyond the paradigm clarifications, the critiques of positivism, the ethical exhortations – an effort to understand and change the conditions that continue to produce undemocratic and disengaged social research and increasingly neo-liberal universities and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

It is not enough to be right and comfortably better than others; if we really believe what we say about action research, then we have to bend our efforts to the comprehensive reform of universities because they are institutions with so much power and so many resources that ignoring them means that we are likely to live out Don’s fear of being right and defeated again.

While action researchers situated within university settings may be having a rough time getting our message about action research heard in university forums, we do seem to have had a modicum of success impacting international develop-

ment assistance or donor agencies and NGOs (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Guijt & Shah, 1998; Wilson & Whitmore, 2000). Many editorial board members have been working for years bringing participatory action research, evaluation, and learning approaches to international development work. Indeed, there are close relationships between our work through universities and development agencies and NGOs at the international, national, and local levels. University faculty and personnel have provided leadership and expertise in project partnerships with international and community development agencies to address capacity-building for sustainable development and poverty reduction. From the World Bank to United Nations agencies to a range of NGOs, increasingly, ‘participation’ has become a required component of evaluation, assessment, appraisals, training, and research projects. This causes us both celebration and serious caution. On the one hand, action research is being legitimized as a useful strategic tool to include community people in addressing the critical issues of their lives. Participatory approaches to research, evaluation, appraisal, and training are being promoted as part of a complex counter to the ‘dismal failure of the past several decades of world “development” efforts in improving the conditions of the poor’ (Wilson & Whitmore, 2000, p.104). On the other hand, as these participatory processes have been scaled up and integrated into development policy initiatives at many levels, action researchers are called to resist co-optation and reinforcement of existing power relations (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Just as the corporate university’s social connection is mainly through competition in the neo-liberal global market, development practitioners who promote action research must continue to promote dialogue on how best to mount a meaningful challenge to the neo-liberal global development enterprise. Who actually participates and for whose purposes? Whose practices are targeted for improvement? How are inequitable power relations actually unsettled and rearranged?

While promoting participatory and action-oriented processes in the field, many development agencies remain hierarchical, rigid institutions with little sense of how to operate democratically and inclusively. Hence the challenges of ‘scaling up’ participatory, action-oriented processes for social justice and meaningful change are similar whether we work in and through universities or development agencies. Although we seem to have had more success promoting participatory processes and action research in development assistance agencies, there is still extensive work to do to help create attitudes, skills, and processes that truly challenge and unsettle deeply entrenched power relationships and interests that resist meaningful democratization. The need to intervene and ‘modify the near environment’ of development agencies and NGOs is surely as acute as in the universities. To paraphrase Geoff Mead (2002), these institutions have been good at ‘activating their immune responses’ to the values and practices of action research. The potential contributions of action research to social change are limited if we are a marginal force within universities, yet the challenges of scaling up, a

measure of the acceptance of action research in the development arena, are equally daunting.

One of the weaknesses of action research is its localism and the difficulty we find in intervening in large-scale social change efforts. The bulk of action research takes place on a case by case basis, often doing great good in a local situation but then failing to extend beyond that local context. For quite some time, practitioners like Björn Gustavsen, Werner Fricke, and Morten Levin have been struggling with the construction of broader, societal-level action research initiatives where the local interventions are part of larger-scale networks and social change strategies. Absent such broader social change strategies and commitments, action research is likely to win local skirmishes but not the bigger social battles that face us all. How should action research address problems such as war and peace, environmental degradation, and a world increasingly hostile to the poor and powerless?

But action research is not merely about ‘doing good’, it is also about doing things well. One of the tenets of action research is that research that is conducted without a collaborative relationship with the relevant stakeholders is likely to be incompetent. The respect action researchers have for the complexity of local situations and for the knowledge people gain in the processes of everyday life makes it impossible for us to ignore what the ‘people’ think and want.

From this initial respect, based on both democratic and empirical principles, action research moves on to the affirmation that action research is much more able to produce ‘valid’ results than ordinary or conventional social science. This is because expert research knowledge and local knowledges are combined and because the interpretation of the results and the design of actions based on those results involve those best positioned to understand the processes: the local stakeholders. Further, action research meets criteria of validity testing more effectively than do most other forms of social research. Action research projects test knowledge in action and those who do the testing are the interested parties for whom a base result is a personal problem. Action research meets the test of action, something generally not true of other forms of social research.

Conventional researchers worry about objectivity, distance, and controls. Action researchers worry about relevance, social change, and validity tested in action by the most at-risk stakeholders.

Many of the editorial board members appear confident that action research has somehow survived and is more prominent now than it has been for a generation or two. The inaugural issue of this journal supports that contention. We must however initiate more inquiry to explain why this new prominence has happened and what can be done to sustain and expand it with integrity. With increased legitimacy comes the challenge to maintain connections to our radical roots. Our hope is that as readers and contributors to this journal, you will keep our feet to that fire.

## Notes

- 1 We would like to thank the following members of the editorial board for their contributions: Hilary Bradbury, L. David Brown, David Coghlan, Bob Dick, Olav Eikeland, Werner Fricke, Victor Friedman, Ian Hughes, Elizabeth Kasl, James Kelly, James Ludema, Robin McTaggart, Peter Reason, John Shotter, Ernie Stringer, Shankar Sankaran, Marja-Liisa Swantz, Bill Torbert, and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt. We would also like to thank Mary's students Cassandra Bolden, Beverly Eby, and Steve Kroeger for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are drawn from unpublished responses to our query. Copies of the original contribution on which this article is based can be viewed at: <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/whyar/html>
- 2 We wish to thank Mary's colleague Lanthan Camblin for this insight. As he observed, 'Wherever they are isn't giving them what they want.' Quite right!
- 3 Among the action research publication and dissemination networks with which we hope to collaborate are the journals *Concepts and Transformation*, *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, *Convergence*, *Action Research International*, *Human Relations* and the book series, *Dialogues on Work and Innovation*. We expect our efforts to be collaborative in the worldwide promotion of action research.
- 4 A recent volume that addresses this issue very directly is Francine Sherman and William Torbert's *Transforming social inquiry, transforming social action: New paradigms for crossing the theory/practice divide in universities and communities* (2000).
- 5 Davydd has written a very critical review of the failings of action research recently, which is published in *Concepts and Transformation* (Greenwood, 2002).

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