Choice and quality in action research practice

By
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Whenever I talk about action research, I want to assert a fundamental message: in its full articulation, action research is a way of living. There is, in the end, no difference between good action research and living a good life. So in a first-person sense, Judi Marshall writes about living life as inquiry (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002); Bill Torbert about bring inquiry into more and more aspects of our lives (Torbert, 2001). In a wider second- and third-person sense, we can see action research as helping develop learning organizations, communities of inquiry within communities of action and wider networks of inquiry and ‘social movements’ (Gustavsen, 2003). It is often pointed out that the findings of traditional social science are of little or no use to members of organizations or practitioners (e.g. Susman & Evered, 1978).

The division between academic life and the everyday was forged at the time of the European Enlightenment, for very good reasons at that time (Toulmin, 1990). I think it is very important to hold to the idea that action research is one way to break down this barrier between living an inquiring life and research in a formal sense, and to see inquiry as part of a well-lived life, and of a healthy organization and society. So I love this quote from the great American playwright, Arthur Miller:

There is hardly a week that passes when I don’t ask the unanswerable question: what am I now convinced of that will turn out to be ridiculous? And yet one can’t

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1 This was the keynote address previously presented at ‘Action Learning Action Research & Process Management’, 6th World Congress, Participatory Action Research 10th World Congress, Pretoria, September 2003.
forever stand on the shore; at some point, filled with indecision, skepticism, reservation and doubt, you either jump in or concede that life is forever elsewhere.

This means that action research is an attitude toward inquiry, not just a methodology. As Marja-Liisa Swantz puts it:

I do not separate my scientific inquiry from my life. For me it is really a quest for life, to understand life and to create what I call living knowledge—knowledge which is valid for the people with whom I work and for myself.

And our purpose, as Orlando Fals Borda puts it, is to ‘understand better, change, and re-enchant our plural world’ (Fals Borda, 2001:31). This applies as a social, as well as a personal level, as Robin McTaggart puts it:

The aim of participatory action research is to change practices, social structures, and social media which maintain irrationality, injustice, and unsatisfying forms of existence.

What, then, is good action research? What do we mean by quality in action research? (I want to avoid the term ‘validity’, with its reference back to positivist research which and suggest that there is one validity). If we hold firmly to this notion of engagement, with practice, with in some sense doing things better, what are the dimensions of quality? One traditional answer is that action research addresses social issues in a practical fashion and also makes a contribution to theory. But this is unsatisfactory, because it continues the separation of theory from practice, and is a justification for action research in an orthodox academic perspective.
If we start from the idea that creating knowledge is a practical affair, we will start not, as in traditional academic research from an interesting theoretical question, but from what concerns us in practice, from the presenting issues in our lives. As Richard Rorty puts it:

We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve co-ordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999:xxv)

And as Paulo Freire put it so clearly:

The starting point…must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people… [We] must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response—not just at an intellectual level, but at a level of action. (Freire, 1970:85)

But does this mean that action research is simply about what works? I think not. Another aspect of seeing action research as a process of everyday life is Torbert’s notion of ‘a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings’ (Reason & Torbert, 2001:7). But as Torbert points out, it is all very well to think that each moment of action might also be a moment of inquiry, but in practice most of us rarely remember that this is so and if we do
remember we find the practice impossibly difficult (Torbert, 2001:250). In consequence, so we habitually act in ways that are unilateral, and which do not generate more effective information for ourselves other actors.

And more formally, when as a journal editor I am offered a paper which describes and reflects on a piece of action research, what criteria should I be using to judge the quality of the paper, and behind and beyond that the quality of the engagement it is trying to tell me about?

In the *Handbook of Action Research*, Hilary Brabury and I developed model articulating five dimensions of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). We described action research as

…a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes… 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. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:1)

We portray as in the five dimensions in the Figure 1.

Part of our purpose was to show the range of questions that action researchers may need to address, and to try to begin to suggest the different criteria against which quality in inquiry might be judged. When you look at the processes in this way, you can see that what
characterizes action research is the enormous range of choices that are open to you. *So a key dimension of quality is to be aware of the choices, and to make those choices clear, transparent, articulate, to your selves, to your inquiry partners, and, when you start writing and presenting, to the wider world.* As we wrote in the editorial documents for the new journal *Action Research*:

One might therefore say that the primary ‘rule’ in approaching quality with our practice of action research is to be aware of the choices one is making and their consequences. We need our concern for quality to move from 'policing' to stimulating dialogue. Thus in considering how we approach questions of quality in action research for the journal, we suggest as a first principle that *the author explicitly address the qualities they believe relevant to their work and the choices they have made in their work.* (Action Research editorial guidelines: [http://www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/actionresearch.htm](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/actionresearch.htm))

We also wanted to stimulate a developing debate about quality, and so we have asked contributors to connect their choices to the developing literature:

However, since there is also considerable scholarship about the nature of quality both in action research and more broadly in critical, constructionist and qualititative inquiry, we might suggest also that *the authors explicitly connect their own judgments to discussions in current literature.* (Action Research editorial guidelines: [http://www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/actionresearch.htm](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/resources/actionresearch.htm))
I want now to explore each of these five dimensions in terms of the choices they offer and comment on some of the quality issues that concern me at present.

**Practical knowing**

A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:2)

For the first issue of the journal I wrote a paper exploring the relevance of Richard Rorty’s brand of pragmatism for action research (Reason, 2003). Rorty argues that among the things that get in the way of creating a just and open society are the dualisms that dominate our thinking, including that between reality and appearance. This misleads us into an attempt to find the ‘truth’ corresponding with a intrinsic nature of reality, when the task of inquiry should be that of human problem solving:

Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein’s words, ‘holds us captive’—the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment—doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words
are among the tools which these clever animals have developed. (Rorty, 1999:xxii-xxiii)

Rorty’s view is that ‘No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality’, it is a Cartesian error to think of the mind as somehow swinging free of the causal forces exerted on the body. So we should give up seeing inquiry as a means of representing reality, and rather see it as a means of using reality. The relationship between truth claims and the world becomes ‘causal rather than representational’ and the issue becomes whether our beliefs ‘provide reliable guides to getting what we want’ (1999:33).

Thus one question we can ask about action research is whether it does ‘provide reliable guides to what we want’. The practical issues addressed in action research projects at Bath include

- How to help communities respond to disaster such as random shootings, train crashes, terrorist attack;
- How to increase patient choice in an out-patient clinic;
- How to improve professional practice: how can I as a teacher can improve my classroom practice, I as a manager discover more appropriate forms of management;
- How Black women can thrive rather than simply survive in UK organizations
- And so on

The kinds of practice concerns at the heart of action research are expressed by Geoff Mead as he starts his inquiry into leadership in the police service:
Improving the quality of leadership is a crucial issue for the police service. Learning about theories of leadership is not enough. What really matters is for each of us to understand and improve our own unique practice as leaders. (Mead, 2001:191)

But the question of providing reliable guides to what we want is actually rather complex, because it immediately raises issues such as who it is that defines what we want; whether we know what we want; and whether what we want is actually good for us. I want to explore two particular critiques.

My colleague Judi Marshall has drawn on Bakan’s distinction between agency and communion (Bakan, 1966; Marshall, 1984)

Bakan proposes agency and communion as…basic coping strategies for dealing with the uncertainties and anxieties of being alive. Agency is the expression of independence through self-protection, self-assertion and self-expansion; communion seeks union and cooperation as it way of coming to terms with uncertainty. Whilst agency manifests itself in focus, closedness and separation, communion is characterized by contact, openness and union. The tendencies are potential complements rather than alternatives (but their very splitting conceptually is a product of the agency feature). (Marshall, 1984:65)

There are significant parallels between this description of agency and communion and the kinds of ‘women’s ways of knowing’ described by Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky, Clinch, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986).
As Richard Tarnas argues so well (Tarnas, 1991) the dominant thrust of western thought and practice has been agentic: the project to create an ‘autonomous rational human self’, an ‘autonomous human will and intellect’. This has been an essentially masculine project ‘founded on the repression of the feminine’ (pp 441-2), on the repression of communion in Marshall and Bakan’s terms. The consequences of this one-sided, agentic consciousness has been, to borrow Skolimowski’s phrase, ‘ecological devastations, human and social fragmentation, spiritual impoverishment’ (Skolimowski, 1985:22).

Gregory Bateson, in *Conscious Purpose versus Nature* and other essays (in Bateson, 1972), argues that a natural ecosystem, such as an English oak forest, is made up of many creatures all of which individually have the capacity for exponential grown in population. The balance of such ecosystems is maintained by the circuits of information that maintain an uneasy balance between dependence and competition amongst the constituent species. Bateson saw these information flows as the immanent Mind which holds the wisdom of the whole. The integrity of a human person or community is maintained in a similar way, by complex processes of information feedback which are not accessible to consciousness. He points out that ‘the whole of mind could not be reported in a part of the mind’ (p. 432) and therefore consciousness is relatively limited. However, it is this limited consciousness that selects what is worth attending—that which is relevant to my conscious purposes:

If you allow purpose to organize that which comes under your conscious inspection, what you will get is a bag of tricks—some of them very valuable tricks…but we do not know two-penn’orth, really, about the total network
systems… Wisdom I take to be the knowledge of the larger interactive system—that system which, if disturbed, is likely to generate exponential curves of change.

Consciousness operates [by] sampling of the events and process of the body and what goes on in the total mind. It is organized in terms of purpose. It is a short-cut device to get you what you quickly at what you want; not to act with maximum wisdom in order to live, but to follow the shortest logical or causal path to get what you next want, which may be dinner; it may be a Beethoven sonata; it may be sex. Above all, it may be money or power. (Bateson, 1972:409)

What I am cautioning against here is a purely pragmatic view of action research as solving problems: if the ‘action’ in ‘action research’ tempts us to become hegemonically agentic—and there will always be a temptation for this to be so, particularly when we are bidding for funding and attempting to respond to the urgently experienced problems of managers and politicians. We may wish to temper this agency with communion, but Judi Marshall, reflecting on the complementarity of agency and communion, speculates this may be the wrong way round. On the basis of studies with women managers, she wonder if ‘communion… twinned with a more or less fully developed agentic auxiliary… is more viable than the alternative pairing of dominant agency with auxiliary communion’ (Marshall, 1984:72).

The key quality questions here seem to be on the one hand

- Does the inquiry lead to more effective practice in the world leading to those involved doing things better?
While on the other hand

- Is this concern for practice well embedded in wider concerns? Is attention paid to the external effects created by this action? Is the shadow acknowledged and honoured?

So I think the ‘action’ in action research refers not just to the practical outcomes, the doing things differently, and applies to all the dimensions of action research. They are all forms of action, all dimensions of practice, all knowledge in action. So while concrete practical concerns will be the starting point, the whole business of doing action research is practice, and our sense of quality must reach wider than simply ‘does it work?’. That I think gets us away from an heroic, masculine vision of action research: it is not just about heroic doing, it is about something more subtle and inclusive than that.

This leads me to the second dimension of action research.

**Democracy and participation**

In the *Handbook of Action Research* we argued that building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to the work of action research; that action research is only possible with, for and by persons and communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:2). Similar arguments can be found throughout the action research literature (for example in Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron, 1996; Kemmis, 2001). Many practices of action research give voice directly to this dimension: participatory action research (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991), co-operative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2001), public
As Anisur Rahman pointed out at the Ballarat Congress, in a very worrying world,

...one positive force has also advanced, which is the awareness of democracy, human rights and social and ecological justice. Totalitarianism, where it still reigns or raises its head today, does so without any pretence of righteousness, and the ‘voice of the people’ when it expresses itself anywhere claims an intrinsic legitimacy. Human rights—including women’s rights—movements as well as movements for environment care are being more assertive than ever before. (Rahman, in press 2003)

Rahman suggested that a ‘deeper meaning of democracy is being sought’ and that an important task for grassroots activism as well as for action research is

...to help promote the empowerment of people—the subaltern, underprivileged, oppressed people—toward their democratic participation and voice in society for realizing their human urges as well as to enhance their contribution to and involvement in the search for deeper articulation of an ideological vision of a more humane world. (Rahman, in press 2003)

These concerns about a deeper meaning of democracy are closely linked with action research. I very much like Stephen Kemmis’ formulation, that
“The first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space”…and to do so in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do, in the knowledge that the legitimacy of any conclusions and decisions reached by participants will be proportional to the degree of authentic engagement of those concerned. (Kemmis, 2001:100)

This formation of communicative space is in itself a form of action. It may well be that the most important thing we can try to do in certain situations is to open, develop, maintain, encourage new and better forms of communication and dialogue.

- Action research projects may open space for communication and dialogue where there was none before creating space for muted and silenced voices (McArdle, 2002); or where there are no forums for democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 2001)
- Action Research projects may aim to improve and develop the quality of communication and dialogue to create more effective communities of inquiry (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 1999)
- Action research may aim to develop a longer term capacity for democratic dialogue, to build institutions

This is not the place to discuss in detail the skills and practices of democratic action, but the following issues seem important.

**Taking time.** Creating democratic spaces takes enormous amounts of time and care. It is easy to bandy about words like participation, and these days some funding bodies like them. But the process of drawing people together and creating a framework for collaborative work
always takes longer than one imagines. At times building collaboration will seem to get in the way of directly addressing practical problems.

**Working against denial.** Where the issues are significant and profoundly difficult to address, there will be quite active processes of denial which make it very difficult to sustain conversations. My colleague at Bath Elizabeth Capewell, working with communities which have experienced significant disaster (such as random shootings, major train or aircraft crashes or terrorist acts) finds that there is a strong tendency for people to deny the extent of the trauma and try to get ‘back to normal’ as possible; they often claim that their community is strong, that the children are resilient, and will recover naturally. This acts against any moves to open up spaces for dialogue and represses discussion of the impact of the disaster.

**Errors of consensus collusion.** Participation can have a shadow side in that human persons in primary association can band together in defence of their version of reality and refuse to countenance alternatives.

**Tensions in facilitation.** There is a constant and fascinating tension between the organizing ability and facilitation skills of an outsider—a professional action researcher, a community organizer, an *animateur*—and the community that is there to be helped. The outside facilitator is always in danger of ‘helping’ in a way that is not helpful because it is controlling or patronizing or suffocating, or just doesn’t understand. Community is always in danger of irrationally rejecting the outsider or of becoming over dependent. For this reason action research facilitators must follow disciplines of reflective practice and carefully monitor their practice.
The limitations of first order democracy. Ken Gergen (2003) makes a useful distinction between first and second order democracy. First order democracy brings together groups of people who share a sense of identity in effective co-ordination about issues of common significance. While it is vital of importance, first order democracy has degenerative as well as generative qualities, and every movement in a generative direction creates grounds for degeneration (p. 50): every step which creates a sense of ‘us’ can create a sense of ‘them’, and the potential for alienation and hostility. Explorations of second order democracy are required to counter this.

First order democracy is essentially achieved by those processes of meaning making that bring into being the disparate voices of the culture. However, such first order processes do not seem adequate to the challenge of confronting the second order problem of conflicting traditions of meaning. The discourses of the real and the good that sustain any particular tradition, seem ill suited to the task of hammering out a rationale for mutual viability. The discourse of creating identity boundaries is not adequate to the challenge of crossing boundaries. Alternative forms of discourse are required, second order intelligibilities and actions that enable us to soften the edges of otherwise embittered and embattled traditions. (Gergen, 2003:52)

In a related manner, Bjørn Gustavsen argues that action research will be of limited influence if we think only in terms of single cases, and that we need to think of creating social movements, which he sees as events interconnected in a broader stream (Gustavsen, 2003).
The challenge, therefore, is to find ways in which the reflective practice of first-person inquiry and the first order democracy of the face to face group with wider political processes. (Reason, in preparation 2003).

In summary, my point in this section is threefold.

• First of all, the creation, development and maintenance of democratic dialogue and the establishment of institutions for democratic inquiry are forms of action in their own right. The establishment of democratic dialogue may well be a far more important and compelling purpose in an action research initiative than the addressing of immediate practical problems.

• Second, the establishment of participation in a world increasingly characterized by alienation and individualism is both far more urgent and far more complex than we allow ourselves to believe. We need to keep deepening our understanding of what we are up to.

• Third, we must continue the debate about the relationship between the face-to-face democracy of an inquiry group and it relationships to the wider issues of creating more democratic societies.

Reflections on quality in action research must therefore include careful exploration of the qualities of dialogue and participation that are needed in a particular situation, and careful and in depth exploration of the processes of establishment and development of such dialogue. We need many more detailed and careful descriptions of the choices action research practitioners are.
There is one other issue I want to raise here. When we think of democracy we usually think about our relations with other human persons and groups. From a deep ecology perspective (Berry, 1999; Devall & Sessions, 1985; Macy, 1991) the human community is an ordinary member of the wider community of beings which make up the biosphere. We clearly have a long way to go before we learn to participate with each other, but if we don’t also see ourselves as participants in the ecology of the planet as a whole we will continue to devastate our living space. As Gregory Bateson put it, if you don’t see yourself as part of the wider whole, if you arrogate all mind to yourself, your chance of survival will be that of a snowball in hell (Bateson, 1972:436-437). In this sense participation, learning to see ourselves as part of the whole, is an ecological imperative.

**Ways of knowing**

One of the traditional claims of action research is that it addresses practical issues while also making a contribution to knowledge. ‘Knowledge’ in this sense can be taken to mean the propositional, abstract theorizing of academia. But many action researchers argue that their work is based on ways of knowing that go beyond the orthodox empirical and rational Western epistemology, and which start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition (see, for example, Belenky et al., 1986; Heron, 1996; Park, 2001; Torbert, 1991). These many ways of knowing:

…assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001:9)
In our work at Bath we tend to draw on the formulation of John Heron, who articulates ‘many ways of knowing’ in a fourfold ‘extended epistemology’: experiential knowing is through direct face-to-face encounter with a person, place or thing; it is knowing through empathy and resonance, that kind of in-depth knowing which is almost impossible to put into words; presentational knowing grows out of experiential knowing, and provides the first form of expression through story, drawing, sculpture, movement, dance, drawing on aesthetic imagery; propositional knowing draws on concepts and ideas; and practical knowing consummates the other forms of knowing in action in the world. (Heron, 1992, 1996). I want to use these formulations to explore some of the quality dimensions and choices that may arise here, building an argument that each of these ways of knowing implies both a different challenge to quality and offers ways of countering that challenge.

Experiential knowing
The notion of experiential knowing implies we somehow go beyond our initial conceptions and open ourselves to ‘deeper’ perspectives: we ‘participate in the being of what is present’ to borrow Heron’s phrase, or in the language of phenomenology we bracket our preconceptions. One of our graduates, Angela Brew, suggested in her PhD that quality inquiry would follow the maxim ‘if you think you understand, look again’ (Brew, 1988): if we don’t open ourselves to the possibility of new perspectives, how can we claim we are inquiring?

Among the doctoral dissertations at Bath are three by Black women who have engaged in personal and participative inquiries into the experience of women like themselves in British organizations (Bravette, 2001; Bryan, 2000; Douglas, 1999). They have all involved deep reflection on what it is to be Black in British culture, upsetting preconceptions of all those involved. Carlis Douglas posed the question,
The issues that face us all are not just how to survive—obviously we are doing that somehow, but how to thrive—thrive with some passion, some compassion, some humour and some style. (Douglas, 2002:250)

Her inquiries included in-depth reflection on her personal experience and behaviour, an intense co-operative inquiry with a group of Black women, and participative engagement and education with a wide range of women in organizations as part of her professional practice in race relations. Her research was based on the assumption that oppressed groups

…develop a sophisticated level of skill at…detecting discrimination in its more subtle forms within interpersonal transactions… We collect this information through our senses and then hold the knowing within ourselves as feelings. In some instances we are able to translate these feelings into conceptual knowledge that gives insights into the ways in which our oppression is maintained. But often this translation work is not done, and nevertheless we walk around potent with this knowledge. (Douglas, 2002:250)

One task of inquiry, therefore, was to explore and articulate this tacit knowledge. But the exploration of this experiential knowing was deeply challenging. Without in any way minimizing the racist quality of UK culture, in her first person inquiries, Carlis had

…uncovered ways in which my survival strategies colluded in maintaining my oppression rather than in negotiating my liberation, [and] I had experienced feelings of vulnerability and of being de-skilled. (Douglas, 2002:252)
The inquiry group

…generated great insights into the challenges for us as Black women wanting to not only survive but to thrive. It connected our subjective and objective ‘knowings’ about the many ways in which we unintentionally collude in the complex process by which many of the groups with which we most closely identify are kept excluded from the benefits of the system and disadvantaged.

(Douglas, 2002:251)

As one member commented, ‘if we hadn’t had the group we wouldn’t have known what questions to ask’

Carlis’ work is a particularly clear example of the significance of in-depth encounter with experience in inquiry process, ‘looking again’ at experience even when this is painful and disturbs well-established survival strategies. But our experience at Bath is that all really good inquiry is disturbing in some way, and that all our graduate students and many of their co-researchers experience some kind of crisis in their sense of who they are and their relationships with others in the course of their inquiry.

We have long advocated personal development work—psychotherapy, martial arts, meditation and so on—as a way for individuals to build their capacity to learn from the challenges that arise in experiential inquiry. We have begun a more systematic inquiry into the ways in which mindfulness disciplines of Buddhist meditation may aid the practice of inquiry. It seems to us that while it is difficult to make direct links, we can describe these as
as providing a *foundational discipline* for inquiry: an underlying quality of quiet mind, a capacity for less attachment to personal identity, and an ability to notice self concern and the manipulations of ego.

If we see mindfulness practice as foundational for first-person inquiry, we might see a range of practices that develop learning communities that are both supportive and challenging—group dialogue (Isaacs, 1999), circle groups (Baldwin, 1996), public conversations etc—as foundational disciplines in second person inquiry. And maybe in third-person research we can see foundational disciplines not only in the everyday practices of democracy, but more radically in the Truth and Reconciliation processes pioneered in S Africa, and the initiatives to create conversations between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East.

**Presentational knowing**

As Bruner puts it,

…we come to experience the ‘real world’ in a manner that fits the stories we tell about it (Bruner, 2002:103)

He appeals for many stories to be told; misquoting Tennyson, we might say ‘Lest one good story should corrupt the world’.

Richard Rorty takes a similar view, pointing to the contingency of the language that we use, it is not possible to arrive a objective criteria for one choice of vocabulary to describe events over another: the difference between what is taken as ‘literal’ and what is taken as
‘metaphorical’ is the distinction between the familiar and the unfamiliar vocabularies and theories (1989:17). So when we want to argue persuasively for a new view of phenomena, we are caught in a ‘contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things’ (1989:9; see also Reason, 2003).

This leads to the key notion of redescription: ‘a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument for cultural change’ (1989:7),

The…‘method’ of philosophy is the same as the ‘method’ of utopian politics or revolutionary science… The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it… it says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’. (Rorty, 1989:9).

This applies to all forms of human inquiry. In a recent co-operative inquiry with young women in management in a multinational company, group members reflected on their experience of being snubbed, criticised and ignored when making presentations. At first, they saw what was happening to them in terms of their own inadequacies but through the inquiry process learned to ‘redescribe’ this as ‘bullying’. And when further they placed this within a wider context of the culture of the organization as based on values of winning rather than values of inquiry, they are beginning to create a new vocabulary (redescribing lots and lots of thing) which has implications for cultural change. It is not a question, Rorty would say, of whether ‘bullying’ corresponds to ‘the way things really are’; rather it is a question of whether it is useful because it invites us to stop feeling and doing some things and start
feeling and doing others. As they learned to tell new stories of their experience, they were able to stop feeling frustrated and powerless. They were able to tell themselves different stories about their managers’ behaviour, narratives that were not offered by the organizational culture, and by responding differently they were able to shift how they were treated in the future (McArdle, 2002, in preparation; McArdle & Reason, 2003).

Propositional knowing

Styhre, Kohn and Sundgren (2002) suggest that theoretical practices must be seen as part of action research. After reviewing the critical, post-colonial, feminist and management theorists they write

…theory is a means for breaking with the common sense thinking that prevails in everyday life in terms of gender, sex, race and ethnicity. For feminist and post-colonial theorists, one cannot argue against common-sense thinking through its own means… As a consequence, theory becomes a liberating force, a medium that can formulate alternative perspectives, ideas, worldviews, and beliefs… not only a matter of verified hypotheses and scientific statements about the worlds… it… can transfer the world into something new… uproots old taken for granted beliefs and establish new topics on the agenda (Styhre et al., 2002:101)

Developing alterative theories critical of everyday common sense grows out of in-depth examination of experience and new narratives. One of the most significant social movement in out times has been feminism (although currently somewhat out of fashion). The work of feminism was grounded in re-examining experience and telling new stories in consciousness raising groups, but out of this new theories were fashioned by writers such as Carol Gilligan,
Kate Millett, Riane Eisler—new theories of gender, of power, of individual and social development.

In current times one of the most important pieces of re-theorizing is taking place in the ‘new economics’ movement (Robertson, 1998) and the global protest against neo-liberal capitalism in the World Social Forums (http://www.wsfindia.org/). There is good evidence that the current domination of world affairs by ‘liberal’ economic theory and neo-conservatism is the outcome of an intentional and well funded propaganda exercise (Houtart & Polet, 2001; Madron & Jopling, 2003). The clear development and articulation of alternative economic theory and institutional arrangements for justice and sustainability is essential if we are to counter the devastating consequences of unbridled liberal capitalism.

At a maybe more abstract level, but having a profound impact on how we create our world, is the legacy of Enlightenment thinking, in particular the way it creates dualisms, either/or, good/ bad, superior/subordinate relations—and of course the fundament dualism between subject and object.

This worldview channels our thinking and perception in two important ways. It tells us that that the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter, and operate according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity, consciousness or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose, value and meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans, and humans alone, have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. This split between humanity and
nature, and the abrogation of all mind to humans, was what Weber meant by the
disenchantment of the world.

The disenchantment of the world is also the disenchantment of the human person,
which the modern worldview sees as autonomous, individual, calculating homo
economicus, separate not only from the natural world but from our fellow
humans. (Reason, 2002)

In my own efforts to articulate an alternative I have emphasized the idea of participation, that
we are participants with each other and with all beings on the planet. I find systemic thinking,
ecology and Gaia theory and Buddhist theory and practice helpful in articulating this:

We participate in our world, so that the "reality" we experience is a co-creation
that involves the primal givenness of the cosmos and human feeling and
construing. ..

A participatory worldview places human persons and communities as part of their
world—both human and more-than-human—embodied in their world, co-creating
their world. It is itself situated and reflexive, is explicit about the perspective from
which knowledge is created, sees inquiry as a process of coming to know, and
which serves the democratic, practical ethos of action research. (Reason &
Bradbury, 2001:7)
Practical knowing

Traditional academic thinking has difficulty with the notion of practical knowing, because, as Rorty argues, it is still attached to the idea of theory as representing the world. If we give up the idea of knowledge is an attempt to represent reality, and view inquiry as a way of using reality, as I argued earlier, the relationship between truth claims and the rest of the world is causal rather than representational, and the issue becomes whether our beliefs provide reliable guides to getting what we want.

This view is of course very close to that of action research, and I would suggest that it here that the systematic qualities of action research come into play. Action research is often described as the cycles of action and reflection: the purpose of these cycles is to check our claims against what actually happens, to ask questions such as, ‘Does it work?’, ‘Do we have evidence to support our claims?’ Chris Argyris has made great play of the differences between espoused theories and theories in use, and proposes ways in which these can be more congruent (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985); my colleague Jack Whitehead is forever asking our students to provide the evidence to support their claims (Whitehead, 2000); there are many techniques available to help us explore our practice systematically, such as the two-column conversation and the learning pathways grid (Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001).

In summary

This brief exploration of different ways of knowing suggests that different ways of knowing will have characteristic threats to quality, which can be addressed in specific ways.

The potential error in experiential knowing is to be trapped in illusion, to create a defensive inquiry which guards against the discovery of the new. Quality inquiry will courageously
seek ways of challenging preconceptions and deepening contact with experience. It may draw on a variety of experiential methods to enable individuals and groups to bracket preconceptions and defences and open new perspectives. Foundational practices can build individual and group capacities for less defensive openness to experience.

The potential error in *presentational knowing* is to stay with the same old stories, to repeat them to oneself and to others so they recreate existing realities and confirm existing beliefs. Quality inquiry will actively experiment with redescription and draw on narrative practices to turn stories upside down and tell them in new ways.

The potential error in *propositional knowing* is to be held within the hegemonic paradigm and uncritical acceptance of taken for granted theories (and its identical opposite, the uncritical acceptance of the currently fashionable oppositional position!). Quality inquiry will engage accepted theory critically and forge new theoretical perspectives.

The potential error in *practical knowing* is the failure to empirically test practices against outcomes. Quality action research will engage systematically in cycles of action and reflection, provide adequate evidence to test claims, and use a range of critical techniques to congruence of practice against purpose

**Worthwhile purposes**

The fourth dimension of action research we considered in the *Handbook* was that it is intended to contribute to the flourishing of human persons, communities, and the ecosystems of which we are part. This raises questions of values, morals, and ethics. When Hilary and I were finishing putting the *Handbook* together, we realized that very few of our contributors
actively attended to inquiry into what is worthwhile: most simply assumed that what they thought was good, was good! But as Rorty points out moral choice is ‘always a matter of compromise between competing goods rather than a choice between absolutely right and wrong’ (Rorty, 1999:xxvii-xxix). If we accept this, we need to be continually asking about what are worthwhile purposes, and when what we currently think is worthwhile is interrupted by another claim. But there can be never be a clear and ultimate answer:

When the question ‘useful for what?’ is pressed, [pragmatists] have nothing to say except ‘useful to create a better future’. When they are asked ‘Better by what criterion?’ they have no detailed answer… [they] can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked ‘And what exactly do you consider good?’ pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, ‘variety and freedom’ or, with Dewey, ‘growth’.

They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology… but rather than the future will astonish and exhilarate. (Rorty, 1999:27-8)

I don’t have much to say about this which is clear, so let me tell a story. At the American Academy of Management meeting in Denver in 2002, there was a series of sessions on spirituality in management, one which included three spiritual teachers discussing the relevance of mindfulness practices for management. The Rabbi who spoke first talked about the importance of Sabbath, in the broadest sense of that word, meaning the importance of leaving the everyday of the week and opening ourselves to the divine. By divine he didn’t
mean a Jewish (or Christian or Islamic or any other kind) God, but an opening to the radical otherness of the greater whole, away from the everyday concerns of the working week.

We need to think about this in terms of research: if you don’t open yourself to the other, to the full otherness of what the Divine means for you, you are likely to be caught in egoic and conventional kinds of choices. There needs to be this kind of radical openness, a move away from the purely human interest, human practice.

David Loy, writing from a Buddhist perspective, argues that to be human is to experience a sense of ungroundedness, of ‘lack’ and our sense of self is a construct. From a Buddhist point of view, this sense of lack has its roots in the impermanence of all things, including ourselves, and our attachment to keeping things the same, which causes suffering. Much of human culture, and the projects to which we are committed, can be seen at root as attempts to divert attention to this underlying sense of lack, rather than address the lack directly through a spiritual practice. From this perspective, all human projects have a religious or spiritual dimension (Loy, 2003).

There is a dimension of action research which I would call spiritual practice, which is about opening to the world beyond the everyday. It is difficult to talk about since so many of us are damaged by our religious experience (just as so many of us are damaged by our educational experience) and because the fundamentalist movements (in all major religions) are closing down the possibility of inquiry, so each of us has to find their own articulation. Spiritual practice opens us to the dimensions of action research which are fundamentally countercultural to Western thinking:
The passion of the Western mind through the ages has been for control and domination, as Tarnas describes (1991), but Gregory Bateson identified an undercurrent of thought concerned with form, pattern and process rather than substance, which goes back at least to the Pythagoreans and comes to us through the Gnostics, alchemists and Romantics (Bateson, 1972:449; see also Skrbina, 2003). Today this is voiced through feminisms, the civil rights movement, deep ecology and Gaia theory, creation spirituality (Fox, 1983) and liberation theology, the voices of the underprivileged South (Fals Borda & Mora-Osejo, 2003), the movements protesting against neo-liberal capitalism and the war in Iraq, the World Social Forums. This is the stream of thinking that reminds us to listen to what is silenced, to honour the margins of our society (hooks, 1991), to always wonder, as ‘ironists’, how we come to see the world the way we do and use the language we do (Rorty, 1989). (Reason, in preparation 2003)

I have tried to do this by drawing on Matthew Fox four paths of creation spirituality, and have created a multimedia workshop experience within which to do this (see www.bath.ac.uk/~mnspwr). We have at Bath offered a mindfulness retreat as part of our research workshop programme (http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/shortcourse/Meditation%20workshop.htm).

**Emergence**

Since action research starts with everyday experience and is concerned with the development of living knowledge, in many ways the process of inquiry is as
important as specific outcomes. Good action research emerges over time in an evolutionary and developmental process, as individuals develop skills of inquiry and as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice. Action research is emancipatory, it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge. In action research knowledge is a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001)

There is always a pressure in institutional contexts to do what my friend Suzie Morel calls ‘end-game’, a term used in the inner-game teachings of Tim Gallwey (1986) to draw attention to the how, by attending to outcomes, one fails to pay attention to the present moment which creates the opportunities for successful outcomes: in tennis, by being preoccupied by winning the point that one stops actually watching the ball. So, for example, ‘participation’ becomes something to achieve in a particular way, rather than an organic process of human association.

We must understand action research as a process that grows, develops, shifts changes over time. Emergence means that the questions may change, the relationships may change, the purposes may change, what is important may change. This means action research cannot be programmatic and cannot be defined in terms of hard and fast methods. There is something here of the spirit of Lyotard’s description of the postmodern artist:

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and principles
are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. (Lyotard, 1979)

But I think not only does an individual project emerge, but the whole practice of action research is emergent. I find as I talk about action research to different groups some of the questions are very practical: How do you set up this kind of group? How do you get funding? What is the relationship between action research and action learning? Good questions, but one that sometimes makes me want to scream! They seem to be putting action research clearly into the box of being a just another research methodology.

Once I heard myself say in response, ‘action research is an aspiration, not a possibility!’ and having said it I wondered what I meant. I think I meant that there are two faces to action research: the practical question of how do we engage with this group of people in the service of doing things better; and the utopian project of helping bring forth a very different kind of world.

In his discussion of politically engaged spirituality in a global civil society, Richard Falk argues similarly that ‘Any societal order is partly behavioural, partly mythic’, never completely and tangibly embodied in time and space, but also held in attitudes, beliefs and relationships. Thus ‘To posit the existence of global civil society is...a political act, both a description of what is, as well as a desire for what is not yet’ (Falk, 2003).

The same can be said for action research: it is partly a family of practical methodologies for engaging people in dealing with key issues in their lives. So the practical questions—how do
we enter participative relationships? how do you get funding? how can we do this project as well as we can; how do you initiate a co-operative inquiry, conduct a search conference? and so on—are all important and interesting questions to engage with.

But action research is also a utopian project. It is also saying, suppose we had a different kind of world? How could we create a different kind of world? Action research is not something you can ‘do’ because each project is continually evolving and changing; and because one can only do action research in its fullest sense in a different, changed society, which action research is continually aspiring to create. By opening new communicative spaces we create new kinds of context in a micro sense. But in a wider sense there is a whole shift of perspective in order to fully be in a participative world where we are acting and inquiring all the time, and our organizations and truly learning and inquiring organizations. For me this is about creating a world in which we understand and experience ourselves as participants with each other and with the whole. The notion that not only is each project a development process, but the whole project of action research also has this kind of utopian quality, a kind of utopian adventure.

**Some Conclusions**

I have tried to articulate these five dimensions of action research and to indicate some of their complexity. There are, of course, other formulations of action research which emphasize different aspects. I think considering these dimensions of action research helps us understand the idea of quality, because they demonstrate above all that action research is full of choices. You could never be part of an inquiry which fulfilled all those dimensions fully and completely; rather, you will always have choices about what is important to attend to at any particular moment. I suggest that *quality in inquiry comes from awareness of and*
transparency about the choices open to you and the choices you are making at each stage of the inquiry; and as Lyotard might suggest, creatively making and articulating your own quality rules as you go along. Quality comes from asking, with others, what is important in this situation? how well are we doing? how can we show others how well we have done? I would also suggest that it is not necessarily a question of whether you have done well, but of how well you have done, and whether you have done well enough for the claims you may wish to make.

Sometimes, immediate practice is what is most important. Someone wrote to me recently and said, ‘Peter, you are too hooked on liberation, transformation, and the emancipatory aspects of action research. Action research is sometimes about issues like how we can put dressings on wounds better.’ Absolutely, sometimes it is.

But sometimes in action research what is most important is how we can help articulate voices that have been silenced. How do we draw people together in conversation when they were not before? How can we create space for people to articulate their world in the face of power structures which silence them?

Sometimes, action research will be about finding ways to open ourselves to different sorts of realities, or finding different ways of telling stories. The Western mind, it is often said, is hugely individualistic, and that individualism drives the frenzied consumerism that is Western capitalism, with terrible consequences for the majority human world and the more than human world. Maybe action research could explore how the Western mind can open itself to a more relational, participatory experience.
Sometimes action research will be more about, what is worthwhile here, what should we be attending to?

And sometimes action research will be about creating tentative beginnings of inquiry under very difficult circumstances, planting seeds that may emerge into large fruits.

I think it is a question of seeing these choices, seeing through the choices, and being clear in a first-person sense, collaboratively in a second-person sense, raising the wider debate in a third-person sense: what are the choices we are making, and are they the right choices? Can we be transparent about these choices in our reporting of our work? That is what I think quality in action research is about.
References


Figure 1. Characteristics of Action Research