Action Research:
Forming communicative space for many ways of knowing
Response to Md. Anisur Rahman

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It is a great honour to be here at your conference in Bangladesh and to be invited to respond to Anisur Rahman's opening address.

It is especially significant for me, given that the poverty about which this conference is concerned is a considerable extent brought about by the past colonial policies of European countries; and kept in place by the current international economic regimes and by the dominance of positivist and reductionist ways of knowing which have their origin in the European Enlightenment. My view is that the twin crises of poverty and sustainability are the key issues which the human global community is facing, and which we have to address from our very diverse places on the planet (Reason, 2002). But our advocacy of participation and action research as part of the way forward may be something we have in common.

Fair Shares. Let me start with a story from our own research. We recently completed a project, funded by the UK Home Office, to conduct action research groups to explore the governance of community groups. This word 'governance' is a strange one, belonging more to the language of government bureaucracy than to the experience of people in community organizations, so we had to keep translating to find a way to make sense of the ground. One of the three strands of co-operative inquiry we initiated was with the Fair Shares Time Bank Scheme in the North Cotswolds—a rural location situated at the border of 4 counties, distant from all kinds of services. The Fair Shares provided a means by which participants could exchange skills and resources and develop self-reliance. My colleagues discovered that the three years government funding which has established the project was coming to an end, the paid organiser moving on, leaving a small part time staff and many participants with no plans about how to move forward.

When the group was approached by my colleagues it seemed that the first response of the staff was that this would be another formal strategy meeting, exploring how to get more funding by filling in forms with tick boxes and making up more stories to please funding organizations. But as they opened the meetings to involve the participants as well as the staff, and as they worked with the group to think more creatively, the focus changed from how to get funds to continue as we were toward how to become self-organizing—lateral thinking, as one of the participants put it.

The story they told went something like this. We realized how restricted we are by the boundaries of funding organizations. We made a shift to working on how to become self-organizing and self-sufficient, getting participants fully engaged. We realized

that chasing money means that you lose your vision of what you are trying to do. It was like a light bulb coming on when we saw it differently—these are bold questions to ask because they deconstruct the formal bureaucratic questions.

It seems to me that this story mirrors the points Anisur Rahman makes early in his talk (Rahman, 2004) about moving away from a dependency creating situation:

- that a people however short of resources they may be, can keep moving forward by mobilizing whatever they have, while those waiting upon outside resources may be wasting their time and energy and/or falling into the trap of patron/client relations with outside quarters surrendering their self-determination
- that this is the response to an appropriate stimulation—my colleagues did not bring a solution, they brought a process of inquiry
- that this is a question of psychology, or I would say more broadly of creating a community of inquiry in which the relations between those involved move toward inquiry and learning.

Young Women in Management. A second example of our work is of a co-operative inquiry with young women in management in a multinational organization to look at their experience and practice in the organization (McArdle, 2002, in preparation). The group was established as a space within which the young women could explore their experience without any of the pressures of a specific agenda that would be usual in such a company. The group met together every four weeks on-site at the host organisation, sharing their stories and ideas from the four-week action phase between meetings and in doing so opening space for new conversations about their experience in the organisation—conversations which ranged from concerns about self-presentation, how they were addressed, the absence of female role models, bullying, and so on. One of the most valuable inquiry practices, which developed over the life of the group, was 'really listening' to each other (as something different from 'waiting to speak'), thus opening a space for new conversations about the experience of being young women in management. This helped them become aware of how their voices were largely absent in the organization. Group members brought their observations and concerns to the group, told stories of their experiences, and reported back the outcomes of action experiments which they undertook away from the group, and were encouraged and helped to develop new ways of responding to their experiences. Most important was the creation of a critical perspective, so that problems experienced by group members were no longer always 'their fault' but could be seen as part of the culture of a masculine-oriented organization requiring a creative response.

The inquiry skills nurtured and developed face to face in the group enabled a more engaged practice in the wider organization. The young women together held a half-day third-person inquiry with over 50 people, including other young women in the organization and senior women in the company, to enable themselves and others to gain further understanding of issues of interest to women in the company. This may sound like nothing new—workshops happen all the time in organizations! However, because they had developed a face to face community of inquiry over a ten-month period, group members were able to create and hold a wider inquiring space. They were careful not to re-create the hierarchy that existed 'in normal workshops' in the company, in which people were rewarded for 'knowing the right answers', but through

quite simple means, such as arranging chairs in a circle without tables, sharing some of their own experience of inquiry, inviting other young women to tell their stories and really listen to each other, helping them to explore their experience, they countered the prevailing organizational culture and created a quite unusual experience for their peers.

Research as participation
Anisur Rahman's paper, and these stories, leads to one of my favourite definitions of action research, that it is about opening and forming spaces for dialogue about issues that were not previously available

> 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 if to open, develop, maintain, encourage more participation and new and better forms of communication and dialogue. I am sure we will talk more about issues of participation during the conference. So let me simply point to some of the issues that have arisen in our own practice

- Action research projects may open space for communication and dialogue where there was none before creating space for muted and silenced voices (as in the previous stories); or where there are no forums for democratic dialogue (Gustavsen, 2001)

- Action Research as creating spaces for issues that are not being properly attended to, such as the sustainability question. We are applying for funds for a major project which will explore making a step-change reduction in the carbon emissions that are having such a dangerous impact on the global climate from industrial processes that employ very high temperatures—from food to steel. Our starting assumption—based on previous inquiries—is that the barriers to low carbon emissions are not primarily technological but social, economic, cognitive, psychological, even spiritual. Our action research process starts right from the very beginning as we find ways to approach colleagues, industrial partners, and funding bodies to create discussions that are not currently well established

- Action Research projects may aim to improve and develop the quality of communication and dialogue to create more effective communities of inquiry. This is often a feature of our work in business organizations, where effective dialogue is often quite absent (Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 1991)

- 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.

Histories of oppression and silencing Last year at the World Congress of Action Research I listened to an African and a Dutchman talk as colleagues about their experience of trying to establish participatory groups in the north of South Africa. They spoke of the systematic neglect and intentional deprivation that this community had experienced under apartheid. And then the African man said, 'Just how do you form communicative spaces with people who have been so deprived?'

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 (Capewell, in preparation).

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. The 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.

I would suggest we must attend to three points.

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, forming participative spaces takes more time, energy, skill, persistence, optimism and resources than we usually reckon on.

Action Research as many ways of knowing

One of the traditional claims of action research is that it addresses practical issues that are important in people's lives while also making a contribution to knowledge. 'Knowledge' in this sense can be taken to mean the propositional, abstract theorizing of academia. But if we want our research to be a truly living inquiry we must go beyond the orthodox empirical and rational Western epistemology. We must consider ways of knowing that are rooted in everyday experience, and are expressed through story as well as through concepts, and which directly support our practice (see, for example, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 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 also 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: 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? This may involve the kinds of challenge to preconceptions about poverty and dependence that Anisur explores in his paper.

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, 1997, 2001; Bryan, 2000; Douglas,

1999, 2002). 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.

<u>Presentational knowing</u>
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 (Rorty, 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' (Reason, 2003; Rorty, 1989:9).

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' (Rorty, 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, 1989:7)

This applies to all forms of human inquiry. In the co-operative inquiry with young
women in management I mentioned earlier, 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).

<u>Propositional knowing</u>
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 pos-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 the 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 movements in our times in countries of the North 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.

> 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)

> If we give up the idea of knowledge is an attempt to *represent* reality, and view inquiry as a way of using reality, 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' (Rorty, 1999:33).

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

A model for action research

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.

Figure 1 about here

I have talked quite a bit about participation and many ways of knowing. Let me just summarize the other dimensions for further discussion at another time.

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)

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. 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 never be a clear and ultimate answer, and as the Buddhist writer David Loy points out, 'meaning, like pleasure, must always be pursued obliquely' (Loy, 2000:127)

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 also 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, 2001:2)

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.

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.

First, second and third person inquiry.

I want close by picking up another important theme in Anisur Rahman's paper, which concerns the role and capacity of the outsider—the *animateur*, the facilitator, the

professional researcher—and the related question of the relationship between the personal and the political, immediate issues and the wider policy domain, the small, intense and the large, diffuse.

We have found it helpful to distinguish between three broad strategies or themes in action research

- First-person research practices address the ability of individual researchers to foster an inquiring approach to their own lives, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. First-person inquiry skills are essential for those who would provide leadership in any social enterprise.
- Second-person action research/practices such as co-operative inquiry address our ability to inquire face-to-face with others into issues of mutual concern, usually in small groups. In co-operative inquiry a small group of peers work together in cycles of action and reflection to develop both understanding and practice in a matter of mutual concern.
- Third-person research/practice includes a range of practices, which draw together the views of large groups of people and create a wider community of inquiry involving persons who cannot be known to each other face-to-face. Under this heading we include for example practices, which 'network' small inquiry groups, the range of large-scale dialogue and 'whole system' conference designs, and the 'learning history' approach.

Of course, what we seek ideally is an integration of these three approaches.

First person. Anisur mentions the role of the outsider in several places:

> We need outside help for analysis and understanding of our situation and experience, but not for telling us what we should do…. He alone is a friend who helps us to think about our problems on our own.

And later

> Also that the animator should himself/herself experience (intellectual) self-reliance in order to be motivated to pass this on to the people – **this means that the animator himself or herself must not be taught but must be taken through a process of self-inquiry**. (Original emphasis)

We place a lot of emphasis on this self-reflective practice in our work with action researchers to develop the capacity for behaving in ways that are both collaborative and inquiring—for the demands of this practice are formidable. My colleague Judi Marshall has explored inquiry as an everyday practice, in a series of papers *Researching Women in Management as a Way of Life* (1992), and *Living Life as Inquiry* (1999), *Self Reflective Inquiry Practices* (2001) and *Living Systemic Thinking* (2002), which have led her through successive definitions of inquiry from research as personal process through research as political process to inquiry as life process. The idea of *Living Life as Inquiry* is based on the notion that very little in life is fixed, finished, clear-cut, and the inquiring practitioner is living continually in process: adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question

A key notion for me is that of engaging in inner and outer arcs of attention and of moving between these. In my own development as an inquirer I have especially paid attention to the inner arcs, seeking to notice myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out and so on. I pay attention for assumptions I use, repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas, key phrases which are charged with energy or that seem to hold multiple meanings to be puzzled about, and more. I work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more knowings. (Marshall, 2001:433)

Most of our students engage in some kind of personal reflection to understand how their existential position and personal history influence their work in action research; and in systematic study of the actual inquiry practice—exploring in detail the congruence between their intentions, their practices, and the outcomes they experience (Fisher et al., 2000; Torbert, 1991)

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. In one PhD I examined recently which recounted a process of addressing poverty in Dublin, Ireland, the author drew on the meditation disciplines of the Jesuit order to monitor his motives and behaviour (Nolan, 2004). It seems to us that while it is difficult to make direct links, we can describe these 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.

The key question here seems in finding the balance between withdrawal into personal practices and engagement in active work in the world, and of finding one's own place of contribution to the enormous range of issues that confront us

Second person. Face to face inquiry in small groups has always been a central part of action research—a key arena in which space can be opened and formed for new dialogue and exploration. Anisur mentions how members of an indigenous tribe (*adivasis*) were organized into camps to analyse the structural conditions of their oppression

The cycle of collective reflection and struggle together constituted the people's 'praxis', progressively enhancing their intellectual understanding that was conceptualized in the movement as "Lok chetna jagoron" ('raising people's awareness').

We work similarly to constitute face to face groups to explore and develop their practice in a process we call co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). We do this not only groups of oppressed—as well as groups such as young women in management, black professionals and other relatively silenced groups we

have initiated inquiry groups with medical practitioners into the theory and practice of holistic medicine (Reason et al., 1992), with members of police forces into leadership (Mead, 2002), with managers in a large construction company into their long term strategy for addressing carbon emissions in their operations.

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.

The key tension here is between the creative, emancipatory work of the face to face community of inquiry and the broader political and structural conditions within which we all work.

Third person. Ken Gergen (2003) makes a useful distinction between first and second order democracy and suggests there are limits to first 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 of vital importance, first order democracy has degenerative as well as generative qualities, and every movement in a generative direction creates grounds for degeneration (Gergen, 2003:50): 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 has done the action research community a great service with his exploration over several years of the issue of scale and wider influence in action research. He has argued that we need to extend the relatively small scale of individual action research 'cases' so that "rather than being defined exclusively as 'scientific happenings' they (are) also defined as 'political events'" (Toulmin & Gustavsen, 1996:11); in a recent paper he develops the argument, suggesting 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, 2003a). Gustavsen writes that his core concern is for the movement for democracy and participation; other social movements in a 'search for a world worthy of human aspiration' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) embrace justice and sustainability (Reason, 2002): feminism, anti-racism, peace, responsible business, and so on. In a subsequent paper (Gustavsen, 2003b)he suggests that we might see action research as a process of building social capital.

I find these arguments persuasive. But Gustavsen also suggests that to build action research as a social movement we have 'to use action research in a distributive way' and that this means it

> … becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a "case". Instead of using much resource in a single spot to pursue things into a continuously higher degree of detail in this spot, resources are spread over a much larger terrain to intervene in as many places in the overall movement as possible. (Gustavsen, 2003a:96-97)

It is here that I am less sure of his arguments and whether I want to follow them. For it seems to me and my colleagues at Bath that in order to influence changes in society toward justice and democracy, and in order to engage people in an exploration of pressing issues of 'global significance', we need not only to build large scale networks of inquiry but also to engage in transformations of consciousness and behaviour at personal and interpersonal levels. While it is true that we cannot make large scale change on the basis of small cases, neither can we build truly effective and liberating political networks of inquiry without developing significant capacities for critical inquiry in the individuals and small communities which constitute them. Rather than argue that distributive networks are more important than the 'single case', we must seek means of integrating the personal with the political, linking first-, second- and third-person inquiry practices.

The challenge here is to find ways to integrate our first person processes of living life as inquiry, our second person transformational work in small groups and our wider work to establish inquiry as a basis for fair, just and sustainable societies. For as Anisur Rahman points out

> …a macro-social change merely toward equity without enhancement of critical awareness of the disadvantaged and of their self-esteem, and a critical level of experience in PSD by way of creative, humane and democratic action in collective solidarity, is liable to invite newer forms of domination and division within the society and relapse into an in-equitable order

Some Conclusions

Action research is full of questions and choices. Part of my purpose is 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. 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. *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.*

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.

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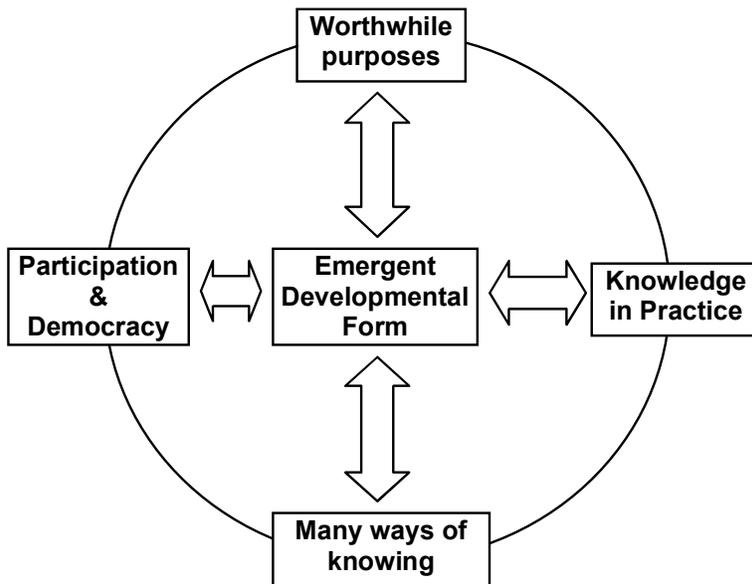Whitehead, J. (2000). How Do I Improve My Practice? Creating and legitimating an epistemology of practice. *Reflective Practice, 1*(1), 91-104.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Action Research