

# A Deleuzian Framework for Participatory Action Research

Linda Henderson, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

## ABSTRACT

A problem is that which gives rise to thinking, it is where thought itself occurs (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Problems are thus more than a realm of solutions rather they are series of potentialities. Drummond & Themessl-Huber's (2007) work theorise the cyclical process of action research drawing on the work of Deleuze in an attempt to contribute to current understandings of the learner and the problem-solving process that permeates action research projects. In particular they draw upon Deleuze's use of the term transcendental empiricism to open up the cyclical processes of action research in a manner that both enriches and moves beyond the more linear representations. Of particular importance in their work is an understanding of the virtual and the actual – "the virtual is not a realm of actual identifiable things...it is the background of contingent potentialities from which singularities...return into the objects and substances of the actual, including conscious thoughts and feelings" (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:435). As such we can never "get behind reality" in order to determine or plan what should take place next (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007). This paper will extend upon this work by presenting a participatory action research project whereby the concept of desire from a Deleuzian perspective become the driving factor behind the cyclical processes. The paper will highlight how through understanding desire as that which is productive saw the project become a "qualitative flow of duration" as opposed to a series of stages (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007). It will draw on the work of three early childhood teachers and the teacher/researcher as they engaged in a year long participatory action research project of learning within the context of an independent school. The paper will outline some of the institutional difficulties experienced by these early childhood teachers as they attempted to engage in learning. Finally it will argue that it was through their assemblages of desire that the learning resulting from this participatory action research project saw them opening up what has been defined elsewhere as a empty space – the space between early childhood and school (Britt & Sumsion, 2003).

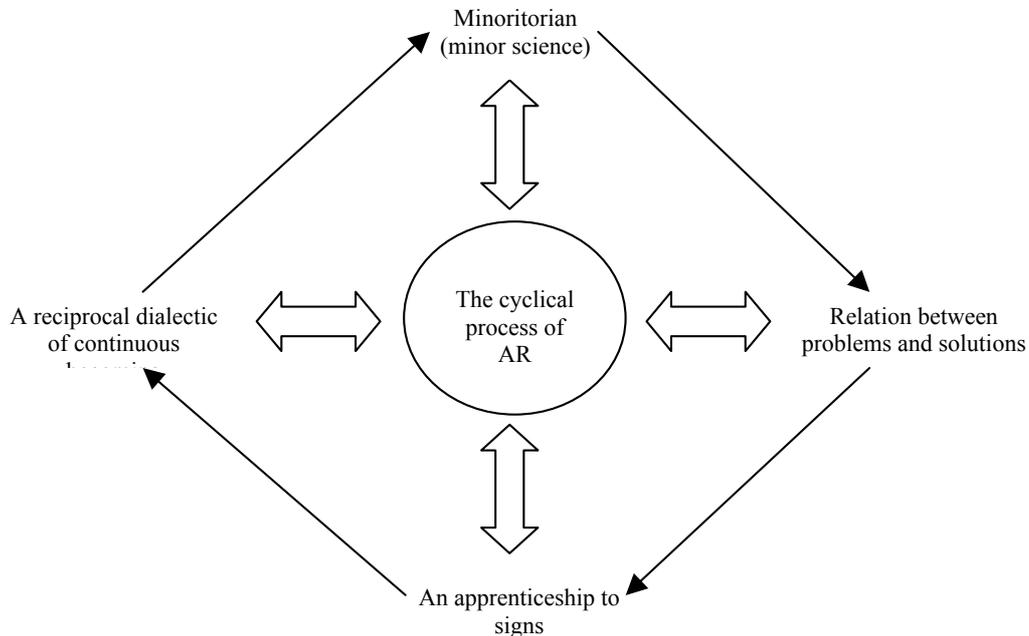
## I. INTRODUCTION

My aim of this paper is to build upon the work of Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007) and their conceptualisation of a "Deleuzian enrichment" of the cyclical process of action research. Providing an outline to their discussion of this enrichment model I want to acknowledge their work that provided the impetus to my thinking on the potential that the work of Deleuze holds in relation to action research and then to extend upon this work in order to further this discussion. Finally I will draw upon a participatory action research project of three early childhood teachers as a way to illustrate this extension and what it may potentially look like in real life practice.

## II. A "DELEUZIAN ENRICHMENT" OF THE CYCLICAL PROCESS OF ACTION RESEARCH

Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007) present their "Deleuzian enrichment" of the cyclical process drawing on four dimensions of Deleuze's philosophy. They specifically state that these four dimensions are interrelated and cannot be conceived of and made sense of without their "simultaneous relation to the

others” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:437). The four dimensions that they introduce are: (1) the majoritarian and the minoritarian; (2) the relation between problems and solutions; (3) an apprenticeship to signs; and (4) a reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007) (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** A Deleuzian enrichment of the cyclical process of action research (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:444)

They commence their discussion of this model by firstly introducing the interactive dimensions of reality as conceptualised by Deleuze. Acknowledging the impossibility of unpacking this work fully in their paper due to its complexity they present the aspects that they see as relevant to action research. These being; the two interactive dimensions of reality; the actual and the virtual. Of importance here in understanding these two dimensions is Deleuze’s drawing on of Bergson’s conceptualising of two forms of time; mathematical time and time as duration. That is time as a continual present. Within this continual present there is the actual, which is life in all of its diverse forms that are in a continual state of movement; a continual process of actualisation. Then there is the virtual, which is in life, yet just beyond the grasp of consciousness. It is the background to the actual holding the contingent potentialities from which singularities return into the actual. And as Drummond and Themessl-Huber rightly point out; “what returns from the virtual in the process of actualization is determined by how we relate to and what we affirm in the actual” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:435). Thus of critical importance here is an understanding that this is a continual actualisation; or as Deleuze would state it is the continual return of difference, or differentiation, from the virtual to the actual (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004).

In understanding these dimensions of reality Drummond and Themessl-Huber draw on the work of Patton (2000) who claim that it is Deleuze’s conceptualising of time which illustrates the impossibility of “getting behind the reality of thought to determine what we will think next” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:435). We can only affirm what is talking place in the actual and be open to the full potential of how this continual return of difference from the virtual will actualise in the actual. We can *never* predict with certainty how this return of difference will return. Applying this understanding of the virtual and the actual then to action research Drummond and Themessl-Huber argue that to deny what is taking place between the actual and the virtual by “holding fast to causal conceptions of the actual is to limit” what may come about (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:436). Or more succinctly “it is to block off the infinite

potentialities that the virtual always holds for something new, for the creation of life-affirming difference” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:436). Thus to pay attention to the relation between the virtual and the actual; to affirm what is taking place in the actual in an effort to open up the contingent potentialities of the return of singularities from the virtual to the actual, is to enable an action research project to remain open to “new insights, to Ideas and problems that continue to interact with the virtual” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:436). Drummond and Themessl-Huber state that this idea must be central to action research for if action research is to lead to transformation then new connections have to be made and this requires as they assert; “a breaking free from habitual tendencies to representation and identity... [in order] to seek new ways and forms of becoming that are transversal to identity, [and] that cut across and change the nature of events and things” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:436). In making this claim they go on to explain their four dimensions.

They begin by introducing the majoritarian and the minoritarian. These are two concepts that Deleuze employs to make distinctions between that which fixes and stabilises (the majoritarian) and that which privileges movement and experimentation (the minoritarian). In relation to action research Drummond and Themessl-Huber state that the:

majoritarian relies on the fixed expressions of identity that continue to affirm it...The minoritarian, however, in the process of an action research project, is imbued with a dimension of creativity that is open to new connections that change the nature of its own becoming. Thus it is not action research as a concept that is minoritarian by definition, or indeed by comparison to more orthodox methods of research, for they may also have their minoritarian moments. It is the so-called cyclical process itself which is *potentially* minoritarian

**(Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:438).**

They then note the critical relation between problems from a Deleuzian perspective. Problems and Ideas for Deleuze differ greatly from a more traditional understanding of ideas and problems within action research. Drummond and Themessl-Huber note here that from a Lewin perspective the cyclical process starts with a general idea which may lead to a conceptualising of a general objective which the idea represents. This is then followed by fact-finding to finalising a plan of action. However, from a Deleuzian perspective such a conceptualising of ideas and problems falls under the law of lack; it becomes an obstacle that needs to be overcome. The power of a Deleuzian theorising of problems and ideas and their solutions is that problems are not something to be overcome rather they give rise to thinking. They are not a negative, but rather a positive to be played with through the affirmation of what is taking place in the actual opening up the virtual background from which singularities return into the actual as a continual return of difference. Problems are thus a means of connecting the actual with the virtual. Problems and their solutions are thus enfolding the whole cyclical process of action research. Or as Drummond and Themessl-Huber write: “the whole cyclical process of action research is to continuously become the friend of the problem” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:440). The third dimension: an apprenticeship to signs refers to the elements of this enfolding of events in both the actual and the virtual and the manner in which one engages with it in the process of learning (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007). For Deleuze, to learn means, to engage with signs which must be interpreted and deciphered (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). The apprentice engages with these signs through continuous participative engagement with the substance under investigation. This is a continuous engagement that provides ongoing feedback. Drummond and Themessl-Huber note here that this engagement differs from what is generally referred to as the reconnaissance or fact-finding aspect of action research. Rather it is an engagement that is suggestive of a continuous re-studying of the problem that encourages learning to “think again and, more importantly, to give birth to new thought” (Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:442). Drawing on Deleuze to explain this further they state: “problematic Ideas are precisely the ultimate elements of nature and the subliminal objects of little perceptions. As a result, learning always takes place in and through the unconscious” (Deleuze, 1994:165 cited by Drummond & Themessl-Huber, 2007:442). Implicit here is an understanding

that learning is therefore unpredictable; difference can return in such a manner that it is only an apprentice's sensitivity to signs that will facilitate an affirmation of the continual return of difference from the virtual. To conclude Drummond and Themessl-Huber state that this leads into their fourth dimension that brings this all together; that being a reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming.

### III. A DELEUZIAN FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Whilst this paper has not permitted a complete unpacking of their model, a model that I pay tribute to for its innovative thinking, I want to now examine their use of the idea of a "reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming" as a way of extending upon this paper. Picking up on their call for action research to break free from habitual tendencies of representation and identity I want to draw upon the work of Deleuze to further explore this concept of becoming and its relationship with desire. To commence this exploration it is first critical to position Deleuze's work in "Difference and Repetition" and its critique of dialectics.

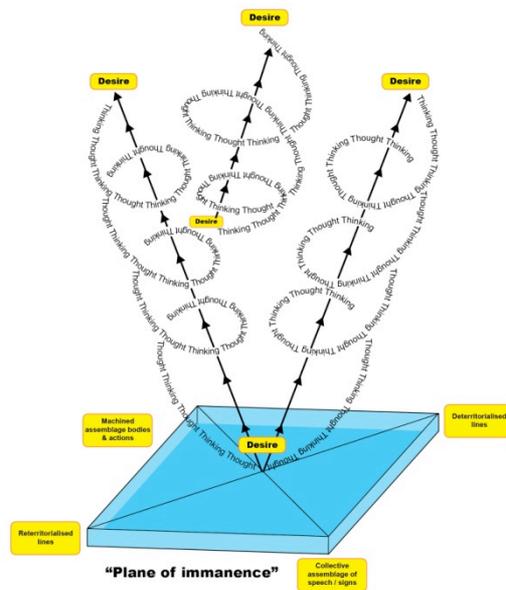
Deleuze's (1994) work in "Difference and Repetition" positions dialectical philosophy, and particularly the work of Hegel, as having relegated difference to a single concept whereas Deleuze argues that difference is in fact two concepts: differentiation and differenciation (Bignall, 2007; Colebrook, 2002; Flieger, 2000; Hickey-Moody, 2007). Bignall argues that "Deleuze's different/citation affirms an alternative, non-dialectical process of development and transformation, and is based upon an absolutely positive notion of difference" (Bignall, 2007:198). To capture this more succinctly Flieger (2000) provides the example of a mug of hot coffee. Left to go cool we 'perceive' a loss of intensity of heat, however, the heat has not been cancelled out rather it has gone elsewhere; "it is displaced, not cancelled out. Difference remains" (Flieger, 2000:52). Dialectics however negates this difference between the categories hot or cold, one can measure the degrees of deviance from the ideal unity, and conflict can be eliminated through this unification (Bignall, 2007). Thus as Bignall highlights difference here, which is existing in the actual can be described as difference in degrees. Yet the process of actualisation; "the differenciation of a virtual, universal chaos into diverse forms of actual complex being – rests upon an alternative conceptualization of difference: a virtual, creative, primary and absolutely positive" (Bignall, 2007:202). Therefore:

pure difference is not tied to lack or negation, nor is it, as in dialectical philosophy, attributed to a thing *externally* by virtue of its relationship to a representative or standard body. For Deleuze, difference is *internal* to a body as it transforms over time

**(Bignall, 2007:202).**

Deleuze's positioning of dialectical philosophy with negation here leaves me unable to reconcile Drummond and Themessl-Huber's (2007) "reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming" when for Deleuze in order to move beyond representation and identity he calls for "a politics of becoming" (Hickey-Moody, 2007:6). This is a becoming that is unlike the dialectic which is negative, negating difference, instead it is a becoming that is positive (Colebrook, 2002). As Colebrook states: "this non-dialectical or positive becoming...has a different political orientation. It does not just free us from fixed images by indicating the flow of history from which we have emerged; it presents the creative flow of time as becoming or the opening to the future" (Colebrook, 2002:50). Thus what I want to do here is to open up this "reciprocal dialectic of continuous becoming" to a Deleuzian becoming with desire as its driving force behind the cyclical process of action research. And so I introduce my Deleuzian framework for participative action research (see Figure 2).

In unpacking this diagram I want to first discuss what I believe to be critical in a Deleuzian becoming in relation to action research. A Deleuzian becoming is political. This mean recognising that; "We are segmented from all around and in every direction. The human being is a segmentary animal. Segmentarity is inherent to all the strata composing us" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004:230).



**Figure Two:** A Deleuzian Framework for Participatory Action Research

Thus a politics of becoming is one which is intricately interested in power and desire (Patton, 2000; Sotirin, 2005). It is a politics of becoming that seeks to dismantle social stratification in an attempt to open up into an unknown field of differentiation (Hickey-Moody, 2007). Becomings are about becoming-other to that which categorises and contains a body; to move beyond the boundaries (Braidotti, 2002; Colebrook, 2000; Sotirin, 2005). Becomings take place in and between bodies; a body acts upon other bodies. Deleuze uses the Spinoza term ‘affect’ here to establish “a conceptual connection between the understanding of bodies in terms of power and in terms of becoming” (Patton, 2000:78). Affects are becomings (Patton, 2000). Hence becomings can be defined in terms of “affects or intensities that correspond to a body’s relations with other bodies: ‘to the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual there corresponding intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act’” (Patton, 2000:78-79). This is a becoming that “cannot be reduced to the negative, nor can it be reduced to a dialectical opposition, but rather affirms a place...from which philosophy is able to bring forth the new, the unknown and the unpredictable” (Hickey-Moody, 2007:6). The implication here for action research is that the cyclical process must be about a process of remaining open to the new, the unknown and the unpredictable. There must be openness for bodies to affect and be affected, to becoming-other than what one was before. This cannot be a dialectical process of negation.

Driving this cyclical process of action research then must be desire: desire that is a productive force producing connections and intensive states within and between bodies (Patton, 2000). Deleuze departs from the desire that he claims has been captured and positioned under the law of lack (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). Instead he claims that desire produces reality, and produces it within assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984). In understanding desire as the driving force positions issues of power and subjectivity within action research as critical. For desire is always produced in an assemblage; assembled desire. Assemblages that produces intensities, particles of affect and a-signifying signs and thus subjectivity is a product of this process (Patton, 2000). Desire is also not simply opposed to power rather it is already co-implicated in power (Bignall, 2008). For desire is in both molar and molecular assemblages; molar assemblages limit bodies whilst molecular assemblages open up new possibilities for new ways of acting and living. Desire can therefore be seen as the ethical compliment to Foucault’s theory of power and

resistance (Bignall, 2008). Desire and power operate together as “components or moments within the causal principle of the will to power, and an *effort* to transform existing modes of desire and power, when they create repressive bodies or bodies that seek their own repression” (Bignall, 2008:139).

Desire can therefore bring about new forms of assemblages; assemblages that can then be analysed by asking: *which* desire has brought about this particular arrangement? (Bignall, 2008). This question leads to the two axes of assembled desire at the base of my Deleuzian framework. The two axes being: machined desire, the material processes of bodies and actions, and the collective assemblage of enunciations; and deterritorialised and reterritorialised lines. Machined desire is the factory of the unconscious; the unconscious production of the real. This is not a metaphor of a machine that someone controls by turning it on and off, rather it is the “machinery that sets itself going and that nobody really controls” (Olsson, 2009:150). Consequently the construction of an assemblage of desire is never a purely rational process (Olsson, 2009). Then there is the collective assemblage of enunciations which concerns speech and signs. Language according to Deleuze has no pre-existing structure and thus the collective assemblage of enunciations concerns signs, speech, ways of speaking and acting. Language is therefore in a state of redundancy and continuous change. Or put another way language is on the move; it is leaking. As a result there is no subject of enunciation; rather there are only subjectified enunciations as needed and determined by a collective assemblage (Olsson, 2009). Finally there is the territory that this assemblage finds itself located upon. We live and act within territories “but from time to time we deterritorialize our current territory” and begin to reterritorialise new ones (Olsson, 2009:152). Olsson captures this succinctly when she states:

we live, sustain and continue to produce ourselves, as well as being produced....But now and then we produce a movement of deterritorialization out of our territory. Deterritorialization changes the specific set-up of an assemblage of desire. It changes the set-up of material bodies and speech and signs, but the return to a territory can never be a return to the same, something has always changed. The rhythm of re- and deterritorialization leaves no territory unchanged

**(Olsson, 2009:152).**

I want to now turn to the participatory action research project that I was involved in with three early childhood teachers to attempt to illustrate what this Deleuzian framework may look like in real life practice.

This project involved three early childhood teachers and myself as teacher-researcher. The context was an independent school. The school had made a decision to introduce Professional Learning Communities as a form of staff professional development. However, in the process of developing this project Professional Learning Communities were relegated for whole staff professional development. This decision was made by the school leadership for they wanted to commence the process of becoming certified as a “Mindful School” by The Habits of Mind Institute. However, due to structural arrangements put in place by these three early childhood teachers their Professional Learning Community was able to continue. Having identified a general idea upon which to base this project on, they determined that their objective or aim would be to examine the use of Learning Stories within their current practice to see if this could further enhance their understandings of children’s learning. However, the territory that these early childhood teachers were located upon; a territory that they described themselves as have an “invisible wall” between them and the ‘school’, provided a background of contingent potentialities. This “invisible wall” has been described elsewhere as an empty space – the space between early childhood and school (Britt & Sumsion, 2003). The identification and affirmation of this “invisible wall” and a desire to rupture this “invisible wall” set about movement within the assemblage that they were forming as learners. This movement became a backwards and forwards movement, it disrupted and disturbed, it affected the bodies involved in this project. There is conflict within and between the bodies engaging in this learning. One of these teachers wants to introduce the language of the Habits of Mind into their learning stories as a means

of making the Early Learning Centre more visible within the school. The other two teachers disagree and debate the language contained with the Habits of Mind. However, this debate isn't directed towards the negation of differences, rather it remains as an on-going conversation where differences are recognised and acknowledged. There is also conflict between these three teachers and other staff within the school. In their attempt to raise their profile they are perceived as a threat. This eventually ruptures when one of these early childhood teachers is told that they must “*stop doing a good job as they are making us [the primary school teachers] look bad*”. All these events are affecting these early childhood teachers; bodies are affecting and being affected. There was a deep questioning of the role of early childhood within this independent school. “*I'm still conflicted where we fit in the bigger picture*”; “*The barrier is still there, it is palpable*”. The territory that they are living and working on has become a series of problems yet the solution is not yet evident. Rather these early childhood teachers remain in a state of affirming what is taking place in the actual. Their desire to rupture this invisible barrier drives their learning towards something that is not yet known. The yet to come, comes in the form of parent night, whereby they conceive of an on-going dialogue with their parents in the form of focus group discussions each term. This they decide is a political move. Provide the parents with a voice in the Early Learning Centre and their own voices will also be heard with greater clarity within the school. This decision was not planned rationally, it arrived unannounced, yet this unannounced arrival is captured succinctly in the words of one of these early childhood teachers:

T.1: This has always been my dream though. Is to have these parent nights when its not just talking at them.

T.2: Well your dream is going to come true.

T.1: Well they do come true, don't they. But I feel really strongly about that.

T.3: You know it may never change anything but just the fact to be seen, to be visible, to give our parents a voice that they may also ask for this when they go into the school. It makes us visible. So just to be heard is important.

These early childhood teachers produced a movement of deterritorialisation out of the molar territory that was constraining them; they change the set-up of their assemblage of desire. Yet they also returned to their territory but it was a return that was different; something had changed. This is because the “rhythm of re- and deterritorialization leaves no territory unchanged” within an action research project conceptualised through the work of Deleuze (Olsson, 2009:152).

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