

Celebrating 20 Years of ALAR: Revisiting the Past for Present and Future

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt

It is precisely 20 years since we organised the 'First World Congress' in Brisbane in 1990, on the basis of the 'First International Symposium on Action Research in Higher Education, Industry and Government', also held in Brisbane, in 1989. At that symposium, participants from the private and public sectors suggested that we organize a similar, but larger international event the following year. The Second World Congress was again in Brisbane (1992). Subsequent congresses have been held in Bath (UK, 1994), Cartagena (Colombia, 1997), Ballarat (Australia, 2000), Pretoria (South Africa, 2003) and Groningen (Holland, 2007).

In this Plenary Session, symposium speakers have been asked to reflect on their experience of past congresses, identify an issue, theme, idea/s or action/s from that experience that is still important today, and discuss the learning, action, lessons and reflections that provide valuable insight for all congress participants to take forward]. It is hoped that these talks will inspire fuller discussion and shared reflection among the symposium guests – not just on past congresses but more comprehensively on the evolution of participatory action research and action learning. We anticipate that the fruits of the symposium will stimulate lines of enquiry and thought that may well feed into all sessions of the Congress as we together try to Zappreciate our pasts, comprehend our presents and prefigure our futures. The following are brief descriptions of the speakers' intended **five-minute presentations from 2–3 pm**. Delegates are then invited to gather around the speaker(s) of their choice for **informal discussions from 3–4 pm**.

II. PRESENTATIONS

A. *Practice Leads Theory*

Bob Dick

Many years ago, someone offered me a job that was too interesting to turn down. I became a practitioner. It soon became evident that much of what I had been taught didn't really fit the world of

practice. As a result, I learned my new job by doing it. The job immediately became even more interesting than I had anticipated. I learned a set of truths that were the opposite of what I had formerly believed. I rediscovered the joy of learning, forgotten during some years of studying subjects other people had chosen for me. For instance I had always assumed that theory led practice. Instead, at least as it played out for me, practice led theory. I found I could often do things well before I knew intellectually how and why they worked. For instance I had thought that relationships were a distraction from the "real work". Instead, as I discovered, they were often the foundation for real effectiveness.

I had been taught that research was a highly skilled activity that didn't come naturally. It had to be learned, deliberately. Instead, I found out that often research seemed to work better when it was most natural. This has been a roundabout way of saying that I discovered, separately, action research and action learning. Later I found that their different language disguised their close resemblance. And later still my appreciation of them was further increased by finding other varieties of the extended action research family that deepened my understanding -- varieties, for instance, like soft systems methodology and appreciative inquiry, among others.

This personal history to some extent retraces the history of action research itself. The action research family has slowly extended itself. Appropriately it is growing more rapidly in practitioner fields than in academia. That pleases me. I think we face a future more turbulent than our turbulent past. Action research, I believe, will be a valuable addition to our tools of dealing with that future.

B. Learning from Our Experience of 20 Years of ALAR (PM) World Congresses *Yoland Wadsworth*

Using a slideshow to aid my reflection, I hope to tell a chronological story of the world congresses (all of which I have attended except for the first) as ones in which the threads of my own story of being an action research practitioner and methodology theorist are joined with those of our emerging wider national and international story. Missing out on the first world congress begins the story in the separation we often experience as lone action researchers where we are not yet connected to each other's efforts. The second world congress put right the absence of human services and community-based approaches to action research in a spectacular way by bringing Orlando Fals Borda from Colombia to Australia, and a contingent from our Action Research Issues Association made the trip to Brisbane to meet with him in 1991. The 3rd world congress in Bath in 1993 had a focus on the education stream of our paradigm, but for me it was a chance to meet others interested in dialogue across difference and distance, including Peter Garrett who had written 'On dialogue' with David Bohm. In Australia we were bridging gaps in understanding in acute psychiatric hospitals, and in the UK he was doing the same in prisons. Four years later in Cartagena Colombia, Orlando brought us the refracting light prism image to show how our by-then rainbow of numerous 'strands, streams and variants' were beginning to converge. The training wheels were off. We had moved from asking 'what was AR?' and 'were we doing it?', to a deepening grasp on its underlying 'architecture' and politics. There was good news and bad news. We were one thousand and eight hundred strong in a UN style grand world congress. But we were also marching with candles in the streets because one of our number had been shot dead – assassinated for trying to assist the disempowered 'inquire for change'. In 2001 we returned to Australia for a remarkable meeting of the minds on the topic of 'Reconciliation and Renewal'. Who can forget the use of the 'conversation pit' in the Café of Possibilities' marketplace for a break-out session involving Mandawuy Yunupingu and nearly 80 rapt participants? World congresses take us face to face with the key players on a world stage, and Ballarat was no exception with Tim Pyrch from Canada, Mike Pedler from the Revans Centre (and future Editor of *ALj*), Robert Chambers of RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal) and PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) fame, Robert Flood of the Hull Systems Centre (and future editor of *SPARj*), Yvonna Lincoln of Guba and Lincoln's '4th Generation Evaluation', Patricia Maguire and Susan Noffke, both of the USA and key proponents of feminist AR and critical education, and in Pat's case also work with native American women and communities; and Victoria Marsick and Susan Weill, both of organisational learning fame. In 2003 it

was ‘the new South Africa’s’ turn and the highlights were negotiating the stark contrasts in wealth and poverty, the tensions and dangers generated by such inequalities, and on a happier side, more connections carried through from previous world congresses into new fruitful collaborations. In 2007 it was the turn of the very old Hanseatic port of Groningen in the Netherlands, and, as I offered a first sharing of my own ‘new’ transdisciplinary theory of living systems, we were at the same time beginning to witness the world beginning to suffer the impact of the climate emergency. And now we are here in Melbourne at the end of 2nd wave AR watching a new proliferative mainstreaming taking place of a paradigm that is on its way to redefining the philosophy of inquiry, at last placing ‘old science’ in its rightful place in a whole cycle, no longer at the centre, distorting life systems into mechanised versions of themselves and taking our species with it to oblivion. But will we be in time? Our work is urgent. I am pessimistic. *And* I am optimistic! ...as fortunately we act ...*and* observe, reflect, plan, and act anew!

C. *Experiential Learning, Action Research and Systemic Theories*

Richard Bawden

Is it really 21 years since the ‘First International Symposium on Action Research in Higher Education, Industry and Government’ was held in Brisbane? It was a good year, 1989. In addition to the joy of meeting up with a whole host of wonderfully inspiring people under the rubric of action research in Queensland, it was also the year when, to my own great satisfaction, Hawkesbury Agricultural College became one of the three foundational members of the University of Western Sydney, and when we were able to offer postgraduate research degrees.

As we have recorded on a number of occasions, the entire revolution in agricultural and socio-ecological education that we launched at that institution back in 1978 was conducted essentially as one grand action research project with a multitude of smaller projects spinning out from it. As our endeavours unfolded, we would come to develop a perspective on learning *as development for development* that also reflected three critical, scholarly, praxial foundations: (i) Experiential learning, (ii) Action research, and (iii) Systems theories. And the ‘three’ theme would be continued with our adoption of the notion of learning itself as a ‘system’ of three embedded cognitive processing subsystems – cognition, meta-cognition and epistemic cognition.

We came to appreciate a central tenet: All transformative acts of systemic development in the material and social worlds – including those related to the transformation of our own Faculty – were essentially functions of the epistemic transformation of those who needed to participate in those acts. In other words, if we are to transform what we ‘do’ in the world about us, we first need to transform how we go about ‘seeing it’. It is the epistemic ‘level’ of cognition with which we must engage if we are to change our ‘ways of seeing’.

D. *From the First World Congress to Action Research Around the World*

Jack Whitehead

On video: The 1990 first World Congress marked the first of my international conferences and I remember it with great affection. It’s been most heartening to be part of the spread of the influence of action research around the world over the past 20 years.

E. *Reflection Deepened IN Action: Collaboration Redefined*

Eileen Piggot-Irvine

About 1850 participants from 61 countries attended the Cartagena World Congress and early struggles and tensions arose due to an espousal–practice gap associated with presentation style, formality, and gender/power imbalance. Spontaneous disruption to resolve the tensions emerged – sometimes via revolt. This led to a Congress like none other before, where a rapid journey towards ‘community’ and ‘collaboration’ emerged.

In many ways the Congress held a key to a way forward for all of our communities regardless of context and ironically we saw the Congress presentation from myself and a colleague on levels of collaboration (Piggot-Irvine and McMorland, 1997)¹ progressively enacted in the Congress itself. The levels provided a framework for reflecting *in action*: for evaluating the effectiveness of the Congress in terms of relationships within a community based on genuine respect and dialogue.

F. *What It Was Like 'Then'*

Robin McTaggart

Two years after completing a Masters degree in education more than 30 years ago, I first heard of action research. I was dismissive, thinking no university would accept it. I found it difficult to accept myself. How could that happen? The short answer is the imperial nature of foundationalism and methodism². After a degree in chemistry and biochemistry, my own pre-service education in education was one year of 'foundations', history, psychology and philosophy of education, and teaching methods in science, chemistry and biology, plus three 'teaching rounds'. I enjoyed it all, a fascinating relief from the undergraduate grind of lectures, labs, reports and exams. During an 'ed psych' tutorial one morning I contemplated a future life as an academic — intelligent chats, tweed coats, leather elbows, pub lunches with students, and banging on about relationships between anxiety and performance, or the history of science teaching in Australia. My reverie collapsed when I was told that educational researchers must have studied history, philosophy or psychology and their research methods. Then I might do respectable applied research, especially if psychometrics featured.

I was a new graduate 1967 then, and by 1977, with a Masters degree and a job in teacher education, I found little had changed. Wherever education research was, I seemed to be elsewhere. This was the case even when I moved in higher education. Even though I had changed jobs, I still had a sense of 'elsewhereness'. Australian advocate for literacy and action research, Garth Boomer (1987), later proclaimed:

Action research is the antidote to elsewhereness.

By 1979, I was ready for any antidote to elsewhereness. I worked with Stephen Kemmis on the Australian Educational Research and Development Commission *Research on Action Research* project, and one task was identifying references to include in *The Action Research Reader* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982, 1988a). It was possible then to 'know the literature' of educational action research, completely. Readings were selected to accompany *The Action Research Planner* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988b) and *Becoming Critical: Knowing Through Action Research* (Carr & Kemmis, 1983). The three books were published by Deakin University for use together in distance education. *Becoming Critical* was rewritten and published separately (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

The rest, as they say, is the very history being celebrated at this anniversary of ALARA.

G. *Action Research as a Transformation Agent*

Shankar Sankaran

I would like to reflect on my own exciting journey into being an action researcher over the 20 years. I first stepped into the world of action research when I enrolled in a PhD program in Singapore conducted by the University of South Australia in the early 90's when we were asked to use action research for our doctoral research. I had not heard of action research until then as I was educated as a scientist and engineer

¹ Published article: Piggot-Irvine, E. and McMorland, J. (2000) Facilitation as midwifery: Facilitation and praxis in group learning. *Systematic Practice and Action Research* 13 (2), 121–127.

² John Wesley proposed systematic prayer and regular charity, a practical method to achieve Christian holiness —hence Methodism and 'Methodists', a pejorative term because of their zeal about the new Wesleyan method.

and became a senior manager in a high technology organization. I was used to a control and command structure in the organization as well as a positivist attitude towards research.

I took on the challenge to learn about action research and found that I was attracted to the action learning nature of action research as the Japanese organization I was working for was into the PDCA (Plan Do Check Act) cycle using Quality Control Circles. So my first impression of action research was its 'kaizen' (improvement) like nature with a bit of reflection thrown into the 'Check' phase of the PDCA cycle.

Soon I was embroiled in a large-scale change program in my organization that involved rescuing an operation of almost 150 engineers which was threatened with closure unless we could change our ways of working. I was the responsible manager for initiating and implementing this change program and this helped me to get involved heavily into action research as by then I had been initiated properly into action research by my supervisors Alan Davies and Bob Dick and had learnt that sustainable change could not be achieved using the management methods we were applying. My 'first person' transformation into an action researcher took place as I became better at reflection and introspection into how I may have been a stumbling block to the very change we were trying to implement and how power could be used and misused in creating change.

My 'second person' entry into action research took place when four of us who were supervised by Bob and Alan formed an 'action learning' set to learn from each other and motivate each other. I also became part of Elogue – a virtual learning set with action researchers around the World. I began to make better sense of the participatory nature of action research.

As I finished my PhD I decided to leave industry and become an academic at the Graduate College of Management at Southern Cross University where I took on the responsibility of setting up an action research centre with fellow action researchers at the University. I also came into contact with several prominent action researchers around the world due to my association with the journal, *Action Research*. This has given me a glimpse of what 'third person' action research is all about. I am now at the University of Technology Sydney and this gave me a fresh look into action research from a different school altogether. I was now in the midst of architects, designers, urban planners, construction and project managers. I have found new 'action researching' friends across the University and in particular in the Institute of Sustainable Futures where both action research and systems thinking are used in several projects. The journey has now taken a different path into worlds I have not encountered before.

My journey into action research has been a fascinating one and I would like to reflect on it at the World Congress.

H. Reflections on a Personal Journey

Vikki Uhlmann

I first encountered AR in 1990 when I commenced my Master of Administration, with Ron Passfield as my supervisor at Griffith University. It seemed so different, but so right. I had been trained in psychology, so the traditional hypothesis testing methodology along with the emphasis on objective third-party academic writing was well and truly ingrained in me. AR's welcoming of the first person perspective was refreshing, and its emphasis on participatory decision-making and reflection very much suited my personality and personal values of respect, equity, fairness and participation. So, I took to it like the proverbial "duck to water".

My work at the time involved much public consultation (which for me really meant getting as close to collaborative decision making as was allowed), so I tried to embed it in my work and my study. My Masters thesis was conducted using AR, and my case study was my work developing my State Government's first policy on public consultation. The thesis was published in the ALARPM journal.

I've been to four ALAR conferences but the one that remains most seminal to me was Cartagena. Although my work in Australia was with the community, this paled into insignificance beside the passion

applied in community development in South America. We were swamped by the numbers of South American delegates, and their march to honour the death of a colleague due to his involvement in empowerment of poor communities left me feeling like I had much to learn from these people.

Years later, I tried to use an action research approach again in my doctoral research on sustainable water management. However, despite the highly participative and reflective nature of my research with water utilities, the traditional research approach was the one that prevailed in my institution.

To me, meeting the challenge of sustainability in an increasingly complex and dynamic future can be achieved only through participatory and reflective action.

1. Reflections by Three Co-convenors of ALARA Meetings in Brisbane for 20 years (on one poster)

Pam Swepson

For the Past

I would like to acknowledge the role of the Brisbane Group in founding ALARPM, now ALAR, in 1991 and continuing to be a major force within the organisation. I think this is testament to a group who know each other well, have similar values, know how to get things done and enjoy doing so.

For the Future

I would like ALAR to take a role in expanding AR and AL methodologies to include specific and rigorous processes of engagement, participation and critical reflection. I believe that critical reflection is an essential element in any version of AR and participation is an aim of PAR, but I suggest that AR methodology by itself cannot achieve these aims.

Pamela Kruse

In 1990, I was working at a foundry at the Gold Coast in Queensland. I had a conversation with Anne Marie Carroll and she "invited" me to come to the World Congress in Brisbane. I accepted the invitation and have been an active member of ALARA ever since. I have been very appreciative of the opportunity to work in a productive, enjoyable way with my ALARA colleagues. I think it is still a pertinent learning that being "invited" to participate is more likely to engender engaged participation in action learning or action research.

Joan Bulcock

The hi-light for me at the first World Congress was Reg Revan's session, now available on video.³ From this experience, through discussions with colleagues who also attended the Congress and others, I was able to participate in the development and delivery of Action Learning Management Development Programs for Senior and Middle Managers in the Federal Government in Brisbane. These programs ran successfully over several years, continually enhanced by the involvement of new managers.

As well as an International Congress every three years, ALARA has also conducted annual conferences, initially in Brisbane but more recently in Sydney and Canberra. These conferences often joined with other organisations which enabled the sharing of ideas and techniques, built strong friendships and promoted Action Learning and Action Research. In Brisbane we have also organised workshops when visiting scholars in related fields have been in town, as well as bi-monthly seminars, 'Communities of Practice', called *Conversations*. Participation in these gatherings has continually increased our email list and attendance by a broad range of people over the years has enriched our learning. Above all, the friendship, camaraderie and support offered by all participants, keep us all together and add to the enjoyment of positive learning experiences.

³ Revans, R. (1991) Action Learning: Reg Revans in Australia. *DVD Series produced by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt*. Video Vision, University of Queensland, Brisbane.