2 Context

in which I describe the background experience I bring to this task, and the theories and concepts which have most shaped how I think about process

The documents which this explication examines span approximately a quarter of a century. (Many have been written, rewritten or at least partly revised in the past decade.) They reflect the 30-year experience that I draw on when I design and facilitate processes. I here provide a brief chronology so that the more specific discussions elsewhere in the explication can be related to the time in which they were developed.

Some influences from earlier periods are also important. I therefore begin the chronology in 1939, from when my earliest reflections arise.

I then summarise the theories and concepts — from many sources but mainly from the literature — which have most influenced my own thinking about processes and their design and facilitation.

A chronology of relevant activities

1   1939-1945   It is probably relevant that in my early years I was shared around amongst various family members (my mother died when I was young; my father was overseas in the armed forces during the second world war). Because I was not given a consistent upbringing I learned at an early age that the adults in my life didn't agree on many things. This freed me to make up my own mind. I also recall being thoughtful and having a lively curiosity which often got me into trouble.

2   1952-1956   An apprentice electrician, I simultaneously studied several years of a diploma in electrical and mechanical engineering. I disliked it, probably because it wasn't my choice. It probably encouraged my natural tendency towards scepticism.

3   1957-1968   I worked as an electrical draftsperson, doing drafting and design work. The experience of rendering a complex object as a series of drawings now provides me with metaphoric understanding of the relationship between theory (or drawing) and reality. The general semantics motto "the map is not the territory" (see later) was meaningful to me as soon as I encountered it.

I learned computer programming, which is process design of a sort, and discovered some unexpected parallels between the structures of computer programs and organisations, including the virtues and dangers of hierarchy.

During this time I also completed first an adult matriculation (which gave me access to university) and then the undergraduate component of a BA (see below).

4   1960-1963   Adult matriculation. In the process I rediscovered the joy in learning which I thought I had lost during my apprenticeship and engineering studies.

5   1961-1963   Amateur theatre work during evenings and weekends. This was primarily backstage work (lighting, stage management, direction).

During stage management and especially production I became interested in finding some way of helping the cast of a play express a playwright's intention while taking into account their own skills and preferences. This, I now recognise, was also process work of a sort.

6   1964-1968   I studied the undergraduate component of a BA in experimental psychology and English language. I enjoyed both. The studies in experimental psychology taught me to value rigour and good design in research. English language studies introduced me to methodologies outside those used in experimental psychology (though not yet action research). The combination of psychology and language aroused my curiosity in psycholinguistics and psychophonology, the topics of my later thesis research.

7   1969   Experimental psychology honours, full time. I met regularly with some class colleagues. In these meetings I learned the value both of pooling expertise, and learning by helping others learn. Though I didn't know it then, some colleagues and I functioned much as an action learning set.

I also audited subjects in organisational psychology and human ecology, my first exposure to non-experimental research approaches within psychology. I experienced the first intimations that undergraduate psychology was as much indoctrination as education.

8   1970   Temporarily, recruitment officer in the personnel department of a large public service organisation. My duties were heavy and routine. For relief I began to explore and improve the links between recruitment and the other personnel functions, which I thought were poorly integrated.

It was only later that I recognised that this task too could be regarded as an example of process design.

9   1970-1973   Industrial Psychologist in the Australian public service. This work had three main components:

- The Queensland part of field research, including case study research.

- An information service on personnel practices and industrial democracy offered to commerce and industry. It was mostly helping managers solve problems. Thus I began to develop an interest and skills in consulting.

- Keeping up to date with the relevant literature. In the course of doing so I became familiar with a wide literature in industrial democracy, organisational design, and organisational change.

I also facilitated occasional sessions in training programs.

10	1973	Lecturer (part-time, one class per week) in a first year psychology subject as part of a management program. The classes were small enough that I was able to experiment confidently with ways of increasing the level of activity and involvement of class members.
11	1974-1994	Lecturer full time in organisational psychology at the University of Queensland. The emphasis in the classes I inherited or developed was on the integration of theory and practice. The classes were intended to help participants to develop useful and marketable skills in organisational psychology, human resources management and change management. These 21 years mark most clearly an explicit interest in the design of processes robust enough to be used with relative safety and effectiveness by new graduates. I documented many such processes during this time. Towards the end of my stay at the University of Queensland I began to develop resource materials, mostly web based, for action researchers.
12	1975 ongoing	During my academic career I have maintained a private business as a consultant in community and organisational change, and a small desktop publishing business in the same field.

13	1994-1999	Associate Professor, part time, Southern Cross University. On appointment, my brief was to develop for Southern Cross University an international reputation in action research. (I believe I've achieved this.)
14	1994-2002	Lecturer (part-time) in organisational psychology at Griffith University. Almost all of my classroom work was with postgraduates and was in the broad area of change facilitation or action research. All classes were at least partly experiential. This contract position ended on 31 December 2002.
15	1999 ongoing	Adjunct Professor, Southern Cross University. In this position I maintain a large action research web site, some associated mailing lists, and an on-line journal with an open and non-adversarial refereeing system. I supervise action research PhDs, many of them offshore. A consequence of this item and item 12 above has been my increasing attention to the methodological aspects of action research.

From the experience I've accumulated since 1970 I believe I can claim experience-based expertise in a number of areas:

- the use of experiential and participative learning methods,

- the design and facilitation of processes for change, and

- the design and facilitation of processes for applied (and often participative) research.

These three areas will provide a focus for this document.

From my upbringing and experience I also bring to work in these three areas:

- a native scepticism tempered by a realisation of the virtues of open-mindedness,

- a willingness to think for myself, even where this involves taking a view which is not mainstream, and

■ a natural inclinication towards theorising, to which has been added a growing delight in developing theory from practice and applying it in practice.

――――

This is also a useful point at which to provide a brief overview of some of the most important conceptual influences on my thinking. They follow.

Important conceptual influences

Some specific influences will be identified at appropriate points during this explication. Some influences, however, pervade much of my facilitation and my thinking about it. They are described below. I begin with general semantics, which I encountered while studying an undergraduate degree. It predates most of the other influences.

General semantics

I came to general semantics through the work of Samuel Hayakawa (particularly 1952 [fifth edition Hayakawa and Hayakawa, 1991]). Studying a BA with a major in English language I was attracted by the title *Language in thought and action*. Only later did I read any of the work on which it was based, by Alfred Korzybski (especially 1994). [1]

"The map is not the territory". The same thought is also expressed, less colourfully, as "the word is not what it represents". It serves as a reminder that our words and other symbols stand for but are not (and do not even resemble) the reality to which they refer.

―――――――――――――

1. Korzbyski is still influential, and there are societies in several countries which promulgate and develop his work. For instance, see http://www.generalsemantics.org/

For me, a more important corollary is that the theory is not the reality theorised. There may be several maps, each different but accurate, of a given reality. If the analogy fits (and I believe it does) there may be several different theories of one reality. Despite their differences each may be appropriate to its particular purpose.

Also, several maps may together better represent a complex reality than any one map can do. Again, I believe similar comments apply to notions of theory and reality. Through studying multiple theories one can approach a more complex and accurate understanding of the reality theorised.

I think I am naturally inclined towards an eclectic approach. "The map is not the territory" encouraged me in my eclecticism. Seldom is there only one effective process to deal with a situation.

Process of abstraction. Hayakawa talks of a "ladder of abstraction", and Argyris (1985 and elsewhere) of a "ladder of inference". Hayakawa and Hayakawa (1991: 101) give as an example the following sequence, each item more abstract than the preceding: (1) the atoms of which a particular cow is comprised; (2) the cow as object of experience, not yet named in language; (3) "Bessie", our name for the cow of level 2; (4) the word "cow", referring to the characteristics common to Bessie and other cows; (5) "livestock"; (6) "farm assets"; (7) "assets" in general; and (8), more abstract still, "wealth".

I later found that Korzybski (1949) took strong exception to Hayakawa's abstraction ladder on a number of grounds. Korzybski's own formulation was of a *process* of abstraction. As Korzybski saw it,

an **event** which consists of sub-atomic processes is perceived by us as

an **object**, a "first abstraction" (1924:13) of the many characteristics of the event, to which we apply

a **label**, which *symbolises* the first abstraction.

Beyond this first symbol there are further abstractions, each taking us further from the sense data which are our link with reality. For Korzybski the eventual abstraction was science. He regarded science, because of its methods, as nevertheless the most accurate representation of reality.

Korzybski seems to treat the event level as consisting *only* of sub-atomic particles in constant motion, and therefore impermanent. To my mind, the "object" too has some reality and some permanence. With some confidence I expect that the car I parked in the garage today will still be there tomorrow unless someone removes it in the meantime.

However, for my purposes the point is this ... The object we perceive is less than all that exists. Thus it misrepresents reality to some extent. The word we use to refer to it further misrepresents the reality. Except in our more deliberately careful moments we are in danger of treating our perceptions and even our symbols and our process descriptions as if they were fact.

In addition, to apply a word or concept to some experience we must first break up the experience into parts which correspond to the word or concept. When the experience is a process we may well misrepresent the fluidity and continuity of that process. Talking or writing about process is likely to do an injustice to the process.

The distinction between evidence ("fact") and assumptions (abstractions or inferences) is important to Argyris too. I turn next to his methodology, action science.

Action science

One of the key influences on my practice was the book *Theory in practice* (Argyris and Schön, 1974). This kindled my interest in action science (the name Argyris gives to his system) and the subsequent literature by Argyris (1976, 1980, 1982,

1985, 1990, 1993, 1999, 2000), Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978, 1989, 1996), and Argyris, Putnam and Smith (1985). [2]

The key contributions to my thinking (most of them contributions that are evident in all or almost all of the work of Argyris and his colleagues) were as follows.

The influence of untested assumptions and unrevealed motives. Above, I mentioned the importance of the distinction between fact and interpretation. Among the interpretations we make are interpretations about others' motives.

Prominent in Arygris's literature is the notion that we act on our assumptions about others' motives without checking their accuracy. We also often don't reveal our own motives. The result is frequently a self-fulfilling prophecy or (as Argyris more often calls it) a "self-sealing process".

Argyris claims in many of his works that unstated assumptions very often taint the processes by which we interact. The design of robust processes requires that we pay attention to the motives that impel people, those that we infer from their behaviour, and our own motives.

Theories of action. According to Argyris and Schön, we have tacit theories which link together situations, actions and outcomes. I will later argue that practitioner theories might therefore reasonably take a similar form:

In situation **S**, actions **A** tend to produce outcomes **O**

Espoused theories/theories-in-use. There are certain action theories we *believe* we act on. These are our "espoused theories". Those which actually *inform* our action are our "theories-in-use". There are gaps between our espoused theories and our theories-in-use. We are blind to the gaps (or we would do something

---

2.   I won't make a regular practice of such apparent over-citation. However, all of the works listed here have influenced my own thinking and practice.

about them). Others are sometimes aware of the gaps in our behaviour.
However, there are taboos against surfacing this knowledge. There are further
taboos against acknowledging that these taboos exist.

The label "espoused theories" in one sense is misleading. They are not
necessarily the theories we espouse to others, where we may deliberately
misrepresent our actual beliefs.   They are, rather, those we espouse to ourselves.
There are thus two sorts of gap between what we practice and what we preach:
between what we say to others and what we consciously believe; and between
what we believe and what our behaviour implies:

What we preach to others	gap	What we believe: our *espoused theories*	gap	How we behave: our *theories-in-use*)
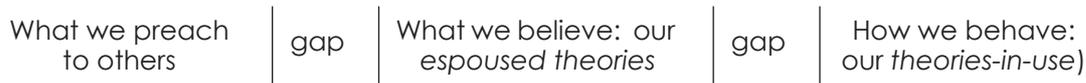
Double-loop learning. According to Argyris and his colleagues, much of our
learning consists of realising different and more effective ways of achieving our
value goals. Argyris phrases it as keeping our governing variables (that is,
governing values) intact. Double-loop learning occurs when we realise that the
governing variables are inappropriate, and change them. We do not often do so.

The links between the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, and the system.
The concepts identified above represent only a small portion of Argyris's
contribution. He shows how the intrapersonal world of thoughts and feelings,
the interpersonal world of relationships and interactions, and the world of social
systems are linked together in mutual influence. To his already substantial
contribution he adds processes for intervening in these three worlds, and in
addition (especially Argyris, Putnam and Smith, 1985) for researching them.

I suspect that if he wrote as clearly as does Peter Senge (1990), who draws on his
work, his contribution would be more widely acknowledged.

―――――

Some other elements of action science have become relevant in more recent years. Action science is also an action research methodology. To explore this point further see the comparisons by Whyte (1991b) and Argyris and Schön (1991) in the book that Whyte edited on participative action research. Argyris has argued for the rigour of his approach in ways that might appeal to experimentalists. (Checkland, too, has done so, as I mention below.) I have found Argyris's arguments useful. Supervising action research theses in a traditional academic psychology department required me to be able to defend methodologies in terms that would be meaningful to my experimentalist colleagues.

I'll come to the action research influences shortly. First, two earlier influences. One was the idea that some of our behaviours are inherited. Models of evolution are therefore important. The other consisted of some cyclic theories and models of behaviour. I take them in this order.

Evolution

My interest in evolution is related to my interest in systems thinking. Systems and organisms evolve to adjust to the demands of their environment.

The basic concept is that individuals within a species vary from one another. Selection operates on this variation using fitness as the criterion. That is, provided there is enough variety within a given species (or system), those organisms or subsystems that better fit their environment are more likely to survive.

I don't know where I first acquired these concepts. They may have come from reading *New Scientist*, which I have subscribed to for many years, and similar journals. Perhaps they were ideas I soaked up from a number of sources over time. I encountered Richard Dawkin's influential 1976 book *The selfish gene* soon after its publication. (It has since been revised: Dawkins, 1989.) I also recall reading Robert Shapiro's account of the origins of life soon after its publication in

1986, and Alexander Rosenberg's (1985) evolutionary approach to biological science at about the same time.

Relevant here, too, is some of the writing on complexity theory as it relates to evolution. I have been most influenced by Lewin's rather journalistic account (1999) of some of the leading theorists. More recently I have found that socio-biology has some relevance, in the early work of (for example) Edward O. Wilson (1975), or later of Christopher Badcock (2000), among others.

From these various literatures I have developed a belief in the virtues of diversity. There are many ways to facilitate a group. I also assume that an explanation of some living phenomenon is more likely to be useful if it is consistent with evolutionary explanations.

For present purposes, our history as a small-tribe species has important implications. I'll mention it again below. All else being equal, I think that a process which takes this history into account is likely to be more robust than one that does not.

Cycles of behaviour

Three of the cyclic models which influenced my thinking are those of George Miller and his colleagues, Donald Hebb, and Bill Powers and his colleagues. All three hypothesise that the brain contains nested neural circuits or the like.

I came across the "TOTE model" of George Miller, Eugene Galanter and Karl Pribram (1960) during my studies in psycholinguistics. Miller and his colleagues thought of behaviour as being directed by a nested hierarchy of control loops. Each loop, named a TOTE unit, has four components:

   Test: perceive the present situation
   Operate: act to change the situation in a desired direction

Test: check that the desired results were achieved; if not, reloop; else
Exit: to the outer TOTE unit of which this unit is a part.

Earlier, Donald Hebb (1949) had offered the notion of "cell assemblies". In the brain, these are hypothesised circuits which are the seat of memory and skills. Hebb postulated that using a neural circuit strengthened its neural links, including with other circuits within which it is nested.

More recently I have had some interest in the perceptual control theory of Bill Powers and his colleagues (Powers, 1973; 1998). It is the source of the behaviour-management theories of William Glasser (1984) and Ed Ford (1997). As with the TOTE model and Hebb's cell assemblies, it presumes that action plans have neural correlates consisting of hierarchically nested and outcome oriented components.

What I draw from the three models above is a notion of motor skills assembled into skill sequences, with those sequences in turn assembled into higher order sequences. [3] At the higher levels the sequences are directed towards the achievement of some goal. The skills have a neural correlate (that is, they are represented in some form in the brain). Many can operate automatically outside our awareness. In some instances they can be attended to consciously.

Reflective cycles

Other cycles of interest are those of action research and experiential learning. Though apparently developed independently of the behaviour cycles identified

---

3. There was a fourth source. In the early 1970s I recall reading a Department of Labour document which set out a training method known as process analysis training or process analytic training. (This term now applies to a very different type of training.) I've been unable to find a copy. My recollection is that it recommended breaking a complex skill down into its component parts and developing the basic components through practice. The elements are then assembled into the more complex skills. In practice I've used this approach in some communication skills training and the like, and found it useful.

in the previous section, they seem to me to share several features with them. Reflective and other cycles are a component of many of the processes I use.

David Kolb (1984) describes a cycle of experiential learning. It has four components:

> concrete experience → reflective observation →
> abstract conceptualisation → active experimentation

This may be compared to the cycle which the *Annual handbook for group facilitators* (for instance, Goodstein and Pfeiffer, 1983:3) regularly used to describe experiential learning:

> experience → publish → process → generalise → apply

Four of the elements are a reasonable match with those in Kolb's formulation. The second element, "publish", refers to an exchange of information between participants. In both cycles the general notion is that by processing experience in certain ways, conceptual understanding can be developed. The increased understanding can then inform further experience.

Albert Palmer (1981) compares these cycles to a number of other experiential learning cycles. He notes similarities. Of the cycles addressed above he includes those of Miller and colleagues (1960) and Argyris (1976) in his comparisons.

The action research cycle is again similar. In the work of Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart (e.g. 1988) it takes the form

> plan → act → observe → reflect [4]

We may change the starting point to make its similarities to the other cycles more evident:

---

4. In current writing (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005) the cycle has become plan → act and observe → reflect. I think this is an improvement.

$$act \rightarrow observe \rightarrow reflect \rightarrow plan$$

I might also mention here the cycle used in quality management, sometimes called the PDCA cycle or (after its developer) the Shewhart cycle:

$$plan \rightarrow do \rightarrow check \rightarrow act$$

where "do" refers to a trial of the planned changes, and "act" to its full implementation. For example see chapter 2 of the book on organisational learning by Bill Rothwell and his colleagues (1995).

These are cycles of wide application. The variation I will later use, consistent with the above, is $act \rightarrow reflect$ and its expansions. The presence of cycles in processes is a recurring and important theme in this explication.

Many of the people who work with experiential learning, action research or quality management also draw on the concepts of systems thinking. To this we now turn. (Roth, 1992, provides an explicit example.)

Systems thinking

My earliest recollection of encountering systems thinking was during my honours year. Having some time spare, I audited two subjects taken by lecturers who were non-reductionist. One of them used a massive systems-oriented book by Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn (1978) as a text. I noted in my bibliographic database at the time that it "averages an insight a page". I will later argue that "systems theory" is less a theory than a logic. It consists of a linked set of concepts which can be used to think about complex situations such as organisations and communities. The key elements are:

the **system**, which is the focus of attention

the **environment**, which is everything else affected by or affecting the system, and which the system tries to adjust to in some way

the **boundary**, which is the dividing line between system and environment

inputs, which are any transactions from environment to system

processes, which are used by the system to transform inputs into outputs

outputs, which are any transactions from system to environment

feedback, which links outputs to inputs.

It is to some extent an arbitrary decision what is to be treated as the system (though Churchman, 1968, says otherwise). Systems consist of sub-systems, which consist of sub-sub-systems, and so on.

Systems are viewed as goal seeking. They seek to adjust to their environment. If necessary they modify the environment to obtain a better fit. They display *equifinality* — they may have many different ways of achieving their outcomes. More importantly, at each level (as one moves from sub-system to system, etc.) they display *emergent* features which could not always have been predicted from the characteristics of the component sub-systems. Systems thinking is thus *holistic*: anti-reductionist. As the sub-systems are often very complexly linked, one cannot easily talk about causal models. When almost everything has some influence on almost everything else, reductionist thinking by itself is not enough.

The way in which I think about systems has been influenced by many writers, but particularly in the early years by Stafford Beer (1974, 1975), C. West Churchman (1968, 1971, 1979), Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1973), and Ross Ashby (1956). In more recent years I have become interested in some of the systems methodologies — methodological approaches which combine research methodologies with systems thinking.

I should mention that some of the assumptions of systems theory have been challenged by some complexity theorists. Bruce Millett (1998) is one. Others, such as Gerald Midgley (2003) seem instead to regard complexity theory as a complementary companion to systems theory. I incline to the latter view.

I've begun to read complexity theory literature and apply it in my facilitation and consulting. I've yet to do much thinking about how to integrate it into my ideas on process facilitation. I do note that the flexibility of action research and the ease with which it addresses qualitative data may fit well in complexity studies. There is work at the Cynefin Centre (until recently within IBM) which is active in developing such ideas (Cynthia Kurtz and David Snowden, 2003). Such ideas fit well with many of the processes described in the attached documents.

Certainly, there are associated research methodologies. Systems methodologies operationalise systems theory in ways which are useful for change work.

Systems methodologies

It was Peter Checkland's work which first caught my attention here. His *Systems thinking, systems practice* (1981) made immediate sense to me. To my mind the first half of his book set out very clearly some of the practical research issues for people who try to do very applied research in field settings. The second half of the book provides a description (at a fairly high level of abstraction) of a process which can be used for soft systems research.

Subsequently, in a paper (Checkland, 1992) given at the second world congress on action learning, he identified soft systems methodology as an action research methodology. This and other works (1999; Checkland and Scholes, 1990; Checkland and Holwell, 1998) gave me a perspective on action research which differs from that evident in much of the mainstream action research literature. In particular, I think Checkland has provided a more rigorous justification for action research than have many other authors who write about it. Only recently have other action research publications given much attention to research rigour. The 2001 *Handbook of action research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, currently being revised) emphasises research quality. So does the new journal *Action Research*, edited by the same authors.

In further exploration I came across Michael Jackson's 1991 book on systems approaches in management. There I found that Checkland's methodology was one of a number of similar approaches. Jackson led me in turn to the work of Bob Flood (for instance 1995, 1999); the balance between theory and practice appealed to me.

Jackson (2000), too, explicitly links systems approaches to action research. So does Flood. The journal Flood edits, once named *Systems practice,* is now *Systemic practice and action research.*

Flood (1997) has also argued for a rapprochement between action research and the management sciences. I concur, though my own interests lie more in the links between action research and organisation development.

Organisation development

My recollection is that my first encounter with action research was during an honours elective in personnel psychology. The following year I found myself working in the area of organisational change. I was practised in experimental research methods. These methods didn't translate easily into field settings. Action research seemed more appropriate to such applications.

I found, however, that (with the exception of French and Bell, mentioned below) there were surprisingly few major works in English on action research and organisational change. At the time, much of the action research literature was of educational action research.

The relative lack has since been partly remedied by Barton Cunningham (1993) and David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick (2001, revised 2005). Evert Gummesson (1991) addresses a combination of action science and organisational change, and has recently (2000) issued a second edition.

In fact, much of my knowledge of organisation development was learned by doing it. I worked with experienced colleagues such as Hollis Peter, [5] Dexter Dunphy [6] and John Damm. [7] They made use of organisation development processes in their change work. I thus learned organisation development as a process rather than as a set of concepts or recipes. Nevertheless, I read widely in the relevant literature. One book which explicitly addressed organisation development from an action research perspective was Wendell French and Cecil Bell's perennial textbook *Organization development*, first issued in 1973 and (since 1999) in its sixth edition. There's a similar emphasis in some of the material in the associated book of readings (French, Bell and Zawicki, 2004), also in its sixth edition.

There were other books and articles I read with interest. Most of them either helped me fine tune my understanding or skills, or confirmed what I was already doing.

Evaluation, too, I learned initially by doing it.

Evaluation

One of my colleagues at the University of Queensland was Wes Snyder. [8] His approach to evaluation was process-oriented and used a systems model. Thus it fitted well with my own way of thinking about issues. When I later accessed the literature on evaluation there were a number of writers whom I found useful.

---

5. Then Foundation Professor of Management, University of Queensland. Before that he had worked at the Michigan Institute for Social Research, and had been an international consultant for Shell Oil.
6. Then Professor, Australian Graduate School of Management, University of New South Wales, and consultant in private practice.
7. My closest colleague, he was then Senior Lecturer (and later, Reader) in organisational psychology at Queensland University, also doing regular consulting work in community and organisational change.
8. Wes was both academic and practitioner. He spent about half of every year in Africa helping evaluate major government programs. Surprisingly little of this is written up except in evaluation reports.

Most of my evaluation documents accompanying this explication are further developments of Wes Snyder's approach.

Michael Patton (especially 1997, 2001) impressed me with the practicality of his approach. I also liked his integration of evaluation and research, and the well-reasoned arguments he provided for the use of qualitative evaluation methods.

Michael Scriven (1991) has provided a wide-ranging reference in his *Evaluation thesaurus*. I also profited from the quality of his arguments on some evaluation mailing lists I subscribed to from time to time, whether or not I agreed with what he had to say.

There were and are many others whose writing I benefited from. They include Lawrence Mohr (1995) for his emphasis on impact assessment as part of evaluation, Saville Kushner (2000) for his practical and personal approach, and David Fetterman (2001) for his comments on participation and his use of an approach much like (and influenced by) action research.

In some other areas I deliberately acted and thought first, and read later. I assumed that this would better internalise the skills and understanding. I could then later hone my own ideas in the light of my reading. Two such areas were adult learning and group facilitation.

Adult learning

I became an educator rather unexpectedly. Initially this happened through being asked to stand in for a colleague in an occasional evening class at the Queensland Institute of Technology. Shortly afterwards the University of Queensland asked if I could be seconded from my position in the Department of Labour (item 8 in the chronology above).

I came to these positions with a good theoretical knowledge of industrial democracy and participative methods. So I took these methods into the

classroom and experimented with them until they worked well. This took some years to achieve. (I will later discuss this experience in more detail.)

By the time I turned to the literature I was conducting highly-involving classes which most participants liked and valued. In most of the reading which I did after this there were few surprises. That said, there were authors whom I found strongly affirming of what I was doing, and who enabled some fine-tuning of my understanding. A few stand out.

Malcolm Knowles was regarded as the leading writer in the field. So I turned to his work first (especially Knowles, 1975, 1978). For the most part this enabled me to learn a language in which to talk about what I was by then doing.

The work of David Boud and his colleagues also drew my attention because of his emphasis on egalitarian methods. In Boud (1988, though I may initially have read an earlier edition) I learned that classroom autonomy was often achieved only with difficulty. My experience was certainly similar.

Later still I came across the approach of Stephen Brookfield (especially 1990), his more carefully argued writing, and his emphasis on the style and skills of the educator. By then I had decided for myself, in agreement with Brookfield, that facilitation skills are a very important part of the educator's competencies.

Group facilitation

When I attempted to introduce the principles of industrial democracy into the classroom I found that there was initial anxiety which I interpreted as "resistance". (I return to this issue later.) As I experimented with ways of offering class members real choice in the level of democracy I found that the results were influenced by my behaviour. How I engaged with the class members was important. So was how I helped *them* engage with the decisions

they were making. In these early years as an educator I learned facilitation by trial and error.

Apart from that, much of what I now understand about facilitation I learned from colleagues. Hollis Peter each year organised an annual 9- or 10-day intensive workshop which made much use of group work. There I co-facilitated groups with such skilled facilitators as Hollis, his wife Salli, Cliff Bunning, Dexter Dunphy, Ken Gilbert and many others. Since then I've worked with too many skilled people to mention them all. Some, however, deserve special mention: Keithia Wilson, Alf Lizzio, Elinor Drake, David Napoli and — more recently — Karyn Healy.

Above all, what I took from this experience is that different facilitators achieve results in different ways. Individual differences matter. However, all of the facilitators whom I regarded as effective had one thing in common. They gave more attention to the process than to the content.

―――――――

With the preceding sections as background I can now sketch in the assumptions and orientation I take with me into the work I do in education, change and research.

Assumptions and orientation

Systems thinking

Like most of the action researchers I've met I mistrust reductionist thinking. I believe that causal models are overused, including in situations they don't fit well. Many of the situations where I work are complex. In groups, organisations and communities it is hazardous to assume that I can understand the whole by

studying only the pieces. It is less dangerous to assume that almost everything
affects almost everything else.

Multiple approaches

I have learned that there are multiple ways of doing most things. My style and
preferences are different to those of most of the facilitators I've worked with. For
example, on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers and McCaulley, 1985) I
have an INTP [9] preference. The commonest score for consultants I know who do
similar work is ENFP.[10] If I were to try to do things as most of my colleagues do
I believe I would be less effective.

As a corollary I assume it is appropriate that other people — such as the people
in my classes and the clients in my consulting work — will benefit from being
encouraged to find their own way. In many practical situations, believing in
"one right way" can be very limiting.

Theories are simplifications

Similarly, I assume that useful theories are mostly convenient simplifications.
For any complex situation, multiple simplifications are possible. In most
instances, to subscribe to many theories is safer than subscribing to only one.
Further, some scepticism about theories is warranted.

Rigour and relevance are both of value ...

My early training encouraged me to value rigour. From my practitioner work I
learned to value relevance. I now seek to combine the two, achieving as much of
each as I can.

---

9.   Introvert intuitive thinking perceptive: a theorist and academic.
10. Extravert intuitive feeling perceptive: creative and people-oriented practitioners.

... as are scepticism and open-mindedness

Similarly, a natural inclination to scepticism was further developed through my studies (see chronology, items 2, 6 and 7). Practitioner work, on the other hand, seems often to require open-mindedness. I seek now to be sceptical about my own ideas and open to the ideas of others. I don't always find this easy.

Praxis: integrated theory and practice

During my undergraduate studies I was encouraged to believe that the most important conceptual challenges were in pure research — curiosity-motivated research. This suited my interest in and inclination towards theory. Second rate intellects, I was assured, did the applied work, because theory leads practice.

Then (by accident) I became a practitioner. I found instead that applied situations often exhibited more complexity than those I had previously studied. In many of the fields where I work, I believe that in fact practice leads theory. Applied theoretical issues are often more challenging. I now value "praxis": theory and practice integrated rather than separated.

The written word deals more easily with theory than with practice. Though I address both, as praxis, you will be able to see my theories expressed on the page. My facilitation is something you can only guess at, from the process descriptions I provide. I invite you to keep in mind that your understanding of my facilitation skills can at best be only dimly glimpsed here.

Simple processes

From my classroom work I have learned the value of simple processes (chronology, item 11). They are more accessible to novices. I have found that such processes will often serve my purpose well too. They leave more of my attention free to watch for surprises and the like. I now prefer simple processes

when they will do the task. I usually aim to use the simplest processes and the simplest technology that will achieve the desired goals.

Autonomy

I have learned that I have a high preference for autonomy. As a corollary I have tried to extend the same autonomy to those I work with. In my work and especially in the classroom (chronology item 11) this has seemed to enhance the learning — and eventually the satisfaction — of the participants. The result has been a strong interest in participation and democracy.

A small tribe species

To my work I also bring various assumptions about the nature of people and social systems. Important among these are assumptions about our evolutionary history and its influence on who we are. I think we are the outcome of a long evolution in small tribes (Dunbar, 1993) as a social species with a long period of dependency and therefore enculturation. Our memes (our enculturated beliefs: Dawkins, 1989) interact with our genes in shaping who we are.

―――――――――

The preceding paragraphs are an indication of the preferences and assumptions I bring to the work that I do, including this explication. They are, if you like, some of the biases that characterise my thinking and my practice. Knowing them, you are now better able to take my orientation into account as you read the chapters that follow.

There is a further set of assumptions I also wish to make explicit. These are the assumptions to do with ontology and epistemology. The next chapter deals with them.