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AREOL

Bob Dick (1997-2005) *Areol: action research and evaluation on line*. Copy of an email and web based course in action research. An index to the original materials is on the web at http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areolhome.html

Contents

a orientation

... in which an overview of the structure and process of the areol program is given, descriptions of the various components are provided, and some of the associated resources are described[1]

Most sessions will begin with a sentence formated like this. Here you will find suggestions for a question which you might think about as you read the material. This session has two such boxes (in addition to this one)...

This material (below) may be more useful for you if you pause to decide what you would like to get out of areol. What are your personal goals for areol? You can use this session to help you decide how to achieve them.

I'd like to treat areol as an action research *process* as well as an action research program. If you were writing this material, what outcomes would you be trying to achieve? What topics would you address first? How would you address them? — and, if your answers are different to mine, how will you inform me so that we can do something about it?

1. Thanks to all who contributed to this program, including former participants. Special thanks to those who took part in or assisted with the evaluations of each program, and to the learning groups for their helpful discussion. Thanks, too, to the many friends and colleagues who have done so much to sharpen my own understanding..

This is the first of three orientation files for areol. It contains:

- a welcome
- some background information
- brief descriptions of program, archives, discussion list, learning groups, and the evaluation team
- suggestions for making the best use of the archives, learning groups, and discussion list

So, welcome to areol: action research and evaluation on-line. [2]

Areol has been run on line regularly twice a year since February 1995. It is revised annually. It has benefited greatly from the comments and suggestions offered by participants in those programs. I thank them for that.

The changes in recent programs have been relatively trivial. There has been some very minor restructuring, and some polishing. In recent areol programs I've given a little more attention to action research as an *emergent* methodology, one whose processes evolve over the course of a study.

Many of the suggestions for improvement were to reduce the amount of material. Many were to add to the material already included. I don't know what to do about this; so for the most part the overall shape of the program has not changed.

Your host

My name is Bob Dick. I'm your host for the 14 sessions of the program.

2. Yes, by academic standards these are short lines, short sentences, and short paragraphs. My intention is to make the material more readable on screen. White space is cheap and improves readability. The email version benefits particularly from the use of lots of white space. Paper versions, too, aren't diminished by being readable.

Soon, an overview of the program design. First, though, I expect that some of you would like to know what I think action research is.

There are many varieties. For present purposes, I'll assume that action research is a methodology for simultaneous change and research. To be able to be used in fluid applied settings, with change as a desired outcome, it must therefore be flexible.

It is cyclic (some would prefer to say, a spiral). That is partly how it achieves its flexibility. It has critical reflection as part of each cycle. It is usually (some would say always) participative. It is usually qualitative, partly or wholly.

In the early sessions you'll be introduced to one particular version of action research. There are many. You'll be able to access the others if you wish through additional reading.

I'll say more in the first content session after we've taken care of some of the preliminaries.

Some of you, too, would probably like to know something about me. After all, we're going to spend some time together. A brief biography follows.

In the distant past I have been an electrical apprentice. At different times I've worked in electrical design and personnel management. I've been an industrial psychologist.

For the past quarter of a century I've been an academic. Most of that time I've used experiential methods to help people learn social consultancy. Most of this was done within traditional psychology departments at traditional universities.

I think my colleagues would describe me non-traditional, and often therefore somewhat marginal.

At the same time, I've run a small consultancy business in community and organisational change, and a small desktop publishing house.

Currently I have an appointment at one university and adjunct appointments at two others. At Griffith University in Brisbane I coordinate fourth year electives in social consultancy and evaluation, and I'm involved in an innovative and learner-centred coursework masters program in organisational psychology. (I'm almost through a part-time two year contract.)

At Southern Cross University I manage arlist-l (an electronic action research mailing list) and areol, maintain and help to edit *Action research international* (a refereed on line journal) and supervise or provide guidance on action research and other qualitative theses.

At the University of South Australia I provide advice on action research theses.

I probably should mention that, formally, I'm not well qualified for any of this. My undergraduate and research masters qualifications are in experimental psychology. On balance, I would claim it as an asset that I haven't ever worked at a job I was formally qualified to hold. That helped me to avoid the indoctrination. So far, too, I've resisted encouragement to upgrade my qualifications.

I should also mention that my natural leadership style is laissez-faire — I think it's your responsibility to decide what you want from this program. I'm not going to offer the "truth" about action research. I'm going to describe my version of the mechanics. I'll try to do so in such a way that it illuminates some of the principles and concepts. I leave it to you to decide what you're going to do with it.

A minority of past participants have said that I don't pay enough attention in this program to history or philosophy. It's true I don't give much space to them. I don't personally think they are what most participants are looking for. If you're looking for those aspects then this probably isn't the place. Fortunately there is a growing action research literature.

(In the on line version I offer to set up a small elist for those who wish to talk philosophy. Other participants tend to become impatient with philosophical discussions on the main discussion list.)

In my spare time I enjoy the company of my partner of 26 years, Camilla, and read science fiction.

Now, the areol program itself ...

The design of the program

The focus of the program is on action research as action *and* research. Some sessions will describe how the action component can be strengthened; others will discuss enhancing the research component. Some will talk about how the two can be integrated.

I've assumed that different people will want to use the program to achieve different goals. To that end I've designed it as a smorgasbord. There are many offerings. You are invited to put together a combination that suits your goals, style, experience, energy, and time.

In many programs, what you get out depends on what you put in. I think that is true of areol.

It doesn't pretend to be encyclopaedic, or for that matter very academic. Mostly I use one particular variety of action research to illustrate some more general principles. My hope is that you'll use it as an example, and work out your own ideas and processes.

I'm still learning how to achieve these outcomes. The present attempt at design goes something like this ...

You can think of areol as a having a tiered structure. The content is addressed in three main ways:

- Most basic are the areol sessions. Taken together, they constitute an introductory course in one form of action research and evaluation
- The content of the sessions is supplemented by archived files. They expand on the material in the sessions. There are instructions on accessing them below
- Most sessions also contain suggestions for further reading. You can follow these up too if you wish

There are a number of different levels of activity allowed for in the sessions. Most sessions contain:

- The content. Your activity is to read it, and (I hope) to think about it
- A trigger question, to introduce the theme and suggest a way of thinking about the material you read
- A thought experiment. You can usually do this without leaving your computer
- An individual activity. Sometimes this involves pencil and paper; sometimes it will invite you to go and do something. And, of course, to reflect on it.
- A team activity. This may be done with your learning group, if you have one. Or you may set up some other group for it. I recommend that you do this if possible; of course, it's your choice.

I think you will also find it very useful to have a project in mind. You can then use it as a sort of "test case" to try out the ideas presented in areol.

More on each of these later.

There is a web version of areol in two locations on the web. It's much the same as the email course and this document. The URL of an index to the web sessions is at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areolind.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areolind.html

(A "URL" is just an electronic address.)

Getting involved

There are different ways of getting involved in areol:

- You can read the material (sessions, archived files, and references to choose from)
- You can in addition take part in the discussion on the discussion list. (I regard this as an important part of the program. I also realise that keeping up with the reading will be as much involvement as some of you will be able to manage. I'll try to encourage discussion; but the level of your involvement is your choice)
- Some of you have joined learning groups. These have the aim of helping you to apply the material to your own interests and projects
- I try to practise action research in my own work as educator, facilitator or consultant. This includes areol. There will be an evaluation at the end of the current program, and perhaps midstream too. The results of this can be discussed on the list. (If areol subscribers wish to do other research on the list and its discussions, that too may be possible. Almost all participants have indicated a willingness to have their contributions analysed if such research is done.)
- A small number of you also have the opportunity to do areol for credit at Griffith University or Southern Cross University. For you there is an additional assessment module. (I'm sorry, this isn't available to most of you. But if you'd like to see the assessment material, let me know and I'll send it. If your own university allows credit for some subjects done elsewhere, I'm happy to cooperate in helping you to use areol for that purpose. In the past a number of people have done this.)
- A for-credit course in action research (which includes some use of the areol materials) is also available through Ian Hughes at the University of Sydney. You'll find details at

http://www.beh.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/

(the final "/" may be necessary)

Beyond all this, there is no limit to what you might do yourself. Some people have set up face-to-face learning groups amongst their colleagues. Some have passed on the areol material to others at the same site, in some instances having discussions with them about the material. I imagine you have some ideas of your own.

Now, the components in more detail ...

Discussion list

Areol began as an email-only program so that it could be as widely available as possible. At its heart were (and are) two email mailing lists. One carries the text similar to what you are reading now. You can read it but not write to it. The other functions as a discussion list. [3]

I expect the discussion list to consider both the content of the sessions on the reading list, and the way this electronic course operates. You can think of it as an electronic tutorial. At the same time, it serves as a monitoring device. I hope you offer suggestions for improving areol.

The discussion list [4] gives you a chance to question anything ambiguous or unclear in the areol sessions. It allows you to provide examples and references

3. I chose email as the primary vehicle for this program for two reasons. First, it provides the widest access: some people have email and low speed modems, and nothing more sophisticated than that, so cannot access the web. However, as I mentioned above, there are web versions at the following net addresses (i.e. URL)
http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areolind.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areolind.html
Even if you decide to access the web version, you may find it useful to subscribe to the email lists. There will be associated material which the web version lacks, and the email version offers you more interaction.
4. To join it, send me an email to bd@uq.net.au or bdick@scu.edu.au asking for details..

additional to those in the sessions. You can use it to express views contrary to those I hold. (I hope you do so.)

I will often post a trigger question on the discussion list when an areol session is mailed. This is just to help maintain the discussion. Some of the participants in previous programs have been disappointed that the discussion list was less active than they would have preferred.

I'm still not satisfied with the level of discussion. I welcome your help in making it more useful for you and the other participants.

I hope that you won't confine your discussion list contributions to the topic of the trigger question. We have diverse and substantial experience and talent here. It would be a pity not to make use of them.

Learning groups

I'll keep this short. There are more detailed descriptions in the next session, which you can delete easily if you wish. I'm mentioning the learning groups here so that those of you not on one of them will understand the otherwise esoteric mentions on the discussion list.

The discussion list (above) is for questions about the material. As I said, it's to help you clarify the material, challenge it, or add to it. The learning groups on the other hand are to allow more specialised dialogue between people with similar interests.

Above all, the learning groups serve as special interest groups. They give their members a forum where they can help each other to apply the material to their own work and projects.

(You may hear them referred to as "learning sets" from time to time. This is because they operate in a way consistent with action learning. "Set" is the terminology often applied to a learning group in action learning projects. You may

also hear them called "pods". This is the label used for some of the learning groups of people enrolled in action research theses at Southern Cross University.)

Choosing a project

There is a simple and effective way of checking the usefulness of this course and your understanding of the material. Have a project. When you read of any process or principle, ask yourself how you can make use of it in your project.

You may often be able to try out processes in practice. When this is not feasible, you can at least imagine yourself using them. Any step you cannot imagine in detail, you probably don't yet understand. This may well be because I haven't explained it clearly or because I've left something out.

Your questions and comments can be taken to the discussion list or sent to me by emai: bd@uq.net.au or bdick@scu.edu.au.

If there is some project which is a high priority for you at the moment, it may be the best areol project. For example, if you are using action research for a thesis, that may be a good choice. (One of the early sessions will touch on the use of action research as thesis research, and refer you to archived resources.)

Lacking such a project, you may choose something you could undertake (or imagine) as part of your work or in your family and social life. Here are some of the features which you may want to take into account:

- it is going to be easier to manage if you can maintain some control over it
- your own practice, for example as a professional or technical worker, may provide a very good vehicle for applying the processes and ideas presented here
- a small and simple project can be more effective for the purposes of this workshop series than a large or complex one; if it is large or complex, there may be some piece of it you can concentrate on

- it is most likely to suit the use of action research if it involves some change you and/or others wish to introduce.

The archive and other resources

There are a number of archives. They contain materials to supplement the areol sessions, as well as other materials on action research. One of them contains an archive for arlist-l (another action research mailing list — many of you are already subscribers). [5]

For those of you who would like more philosophy, I have two suggestions. First, I've already mentioned the "academic" learning group. Second, the list armnet-l (for "action research methodology network") is for discussion of methodological and philosophical issues. [6]

List archives

The reading and discussion lists are archived at

http://www.scu.edu.au/lists/areol-r-l/ and
http://www.scu.edu.au/lists/areol-d-l/

Archived resources

Introductory files you might find relevant are arfaq.html, a frequently-asked-questions (faq) file and guide.html, a preliminary guide to action research. Both of these are in the archive.

There is also a file actlearn.html which gives a brief description of some of the similarities and differences between action learning and action research. And

5. To subscribe to arlist-l you send the plain text email message "subscribe ARLIST-L Your Name" (without the quotes, and substituting your name in the appropriate place) to listproc@scu.edu.au
6. To subscribe to armnet-l send the plain text email message "subscribe ARMNET-L Your Name" (without the quotes, and substituting your name for "Your Name") to listproc@scu.edu.au

Shankar Sankaran has prepared a bibliography on action learning. Named al_biblio.html (note: "al", not "ar"), it also is on the archive. A further introductory file aandr.html outlines some of the ways action research achieves both action and research and integrates them.

These are available on the web:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/arfaq.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/guide.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/guide.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/al-biblio.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/al-biblio.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/aandr.html

Other reading

For introductory reading on action research and related approaches you might try any of the following:

Greenwood, Davydd, and Levin, Morten (1998) *Introduction to action research: social research for social change*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage.

Kemmis, Stephen, and McTaggart, Robin, eds. (1988) *The action research planner*, third edition. Victoria: Deakin University.

Reason, Peter, ed. (1988) *Human inquiry in action: developments in new paradigm research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Stringer, Ernie (1996) *Action research: a handbook for practitioners*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

And of course there are many others.

If you are more experienced, or you wish to gain an impression of the breadth of current action research, Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury have edited a recent handbook of action research:

Reason, Peter, and Bradbury, Hilary, eds. (2001) *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage.

For some recent papers on action learning, many of them practical, see:

Pedler, Mike, ed. (1991) *Action learning in practice*, second edition. Aldershot, Hants.: Gower.

Krystyna Weinstein has written a very practical and readable account of action learning, based on her experience with a variety of action learning groups (usually called "learning sets"):

Weinstein, K. (1995) *Action learning: a practical guide for managers*, second edition. London: Gower.

(The first edition had a different subtitle and a different publisher.)

I maintain a file in the archive on recent books on action research and related topics. It includes citations (sometimes with brief notes) on most action research books which have been published since 1994. You'll find it at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/books.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/books.html

In summary ...

In this orientation you've been introduced to a number of ways in which you can become more involved through

- the accompanying discussion group, to raise questions and comments

- a learning group, to discuss with a small group of people your use of the material
- the use of a project as a vehicle for learning
- the list archives, to retrieve list material
- the action research archives, or further resources

If you have any difficulties in implementing or accessing any of this, don't hesitate to let me know.

The next part of the orientation offers some suggestions for starting and maintaining effective and satisfying learning groups.

Let's practice action research on areol. What ideas do you have for improving this orientation? What didn't you understand? What examples and resources can you provide from your own experience? What else? If you are enrolled in the email version send your comments to the discussion list areol-d-l@scu.edu.au or to me at bd@uq.net.au or bdick@scu.edu.au.

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b learning groups

... in which some suggestions are offered for helping your learning groups to start well and to function in useful and satisfying ways

This is part of the orientation to areol. However, it also has relevance to the practice of action research. It can provide you with direct experience, at least electronically, of the factors which help and hinder interaction — including interaction within an action research program. If action research is action *and* research, then action researchers find it useful to be skilled in communication, facilitation, and helping others learn. How much of the material below can you use in your action research project?

In this second orientation session:

- an overview of learning groups
- the different functions of the learning groups and the discussion list
- facilitating learning groups: community building, goal setting, deciding the process
- setting up other learning groups.

This session is most useful for those people who have asked to join a learning group, especially if they have offered to help facilitate it. It also provides some

information for those who may wish to start their own learning group, perhaps face to face.

Other areol subscribers may or may not find it relevant. I would guess, though, that at least some of the concepts of group facilitation have wider application.

Established groups

(This is for those enrolled in the on line program.)

When you subscribe to areol you are asked if you wished to join one of the pre-established groups: novice; practitioner; academic; thesis (candidate or supervisor).

A mailing list is provided at Southern Cross University for each of these groups. If you've subscribed to one of them, you'll receive separate notification about the details.

There may be opportunities to set up other mailing lists at Southern Cross University too.

Learning groups: an overview

The suggested approach for the learning groups is a form of action learning. It is an experiential learning methodology which fits well with action research.

In its traditional form, action learning brings together people from different situations to help each other learn. Nowadays the learning group increasingly consists instead of a project team of some sort. The first of these will suit many of you. The different situations might consist of the action research projects you have chosen, or your normal work practice. If you have set up a face to face team, you may choose the second option of having a joint project.

A face-to-face learning group, often called a "learning set", typically consists of about five people. (With members skilled in facilitation, I've had good results from even smaller groups.) There may or may not be a group facilitator.

Email groups may be different. My recent experience suggests that the best size for them may be a somewhat larger, and perhaps even substantially larger.

Email or face to face?

Action learning groups almost always rely on face-to-face meetings. This remains a choice for you, too, if you are geographically close to some other areol subscribers. It may be the best option for those of you who can assemble such a group from amongst your colleagues or friends.

I've said a little more about forming your own group, below.

In some respects electronic communication is a poor substitute for meeting face-to-face. In particular, it does not offer the same level of interaction.

However, there are also some important advantages. It overcomes limitations of space and time. You can exchange information even when it is almost impossible to schedule a meeting which suits everyone. You can prepare your material, and read the material from others, at a time that suits you. You can easily accumulate a full written record.

You can always complement an email learning group with an occasional telephone conference if you are not too scattered geographically. Faxes can be used for material not easily reduced to text. And if there are any opportunities for face to face interaction, they can be seized.

Learning group and discussion group

I see the learning group and the discussion group serving different purposes:

The *discussion group* provides a forum where people can react directly to the material in the areol sessions. In particular, it gives an opportunity for you to raise questions about any ambiguities in the material, to offer different perspectives and materials, to point out errors, and so on.

I expect most of the material there to relate most directly to the current areol session. It will probably also be of fairly *general* significance.

The learning group allows a smaller and more focussed group of people to help each other. In particular, I assume that your main task there is to help each other learn from the material, and from your experience. In many instances, it will be to make visible the learning which has already occurred.

It may relate most directly to your projects. It may also help you apply the material in the sessions to the projects. I expect you'll have a chance to compare projects and experiences. So you'll be able to examine the practical aspects of action research as they relate to your area of interest. There will probably be interests that you share, and which may not interest the larger discussion group.

I hope there will also be some traffic between the learning groups and the discussion group. To this end, I'd encourage you to report to the discussion group any information from the learning group which is likely to be of relevance to most areol subscribers.

Learning groups in more detail

As I've said, the primary function of the group is to be a small learning community where you help and support each other in your learning. I think you will find that relating theory and practice to each other is an important part of this.

For example, you can help each other to ...

- draw conceptual insights from your experience, whether areol activities or other experience

- understand better how to apply the areol material in practice.

Your learning group can serve a number of other valuable purposes, including:

- providing support and friendship
- helping each other decide how to proceed with your work or your project
- exchanging material relevant to the more specific interests of the learning group
- learning vicariously from one another's experience.

I suggest that, in your group and on the discussion list, you also share the experiences from your projects or work settings.

Facilitation

In my experience, most face to face groups can work without a regular facilitator. However, I don't think they can function well without *facilitation*. At any moment it is best that someone (preferably several someones) has an eye on the process. It doesn't always have to be the same person.

I suspect that most of you will choose to operate in the following way. So that there is facilitation, I imagine that a number of you will share the task, perhaps in rotation. But in any event I strongly recommend that, whoever is facilitating at any moment, you do what you can to help them.

In fact, to help you develop an effective and satisfying process, I suggest that all of you take responsibility for keeping the group functioning well.

I invite you to take a moment to think ... What are some of the features of groups you've been in which have been productive and satisfying? What has hindered productivity and satisfaction? What will *you* do, personally, to bring about the positives and reduce the negatives?

I also suspect that the learning group will get off to a quicker start if some one or two of you help it to do so. There are three important early tasks that such a person or persons can guide you through:

- building a sense of community
- agreeing on goals
- deciding how you are going to function.

The sequence doesn't seem to matter all that much. A bit of each allows you to get started. Then you can pick them up and develop them further as that seems appropriate.

I say a little more about each of these below.

The areol sessions begin almost immediately. I suggest, therefore, that you make a start on your learning group activities as soon as you can.

Building a sense of community

It is easier to help each other with your learning if you have some knowledge of each other, and of your projects.

To help with this you will shortly receive a list of the brief bios you've provided. I think you'll be impressed by the diversity and depth of experience, as I was.

When the learning groups are set up, I think you'll find it useful to say a little there about your interests in action research, whatever those interests are. I'll provide details of the learning group addresses when the lists are set up.

To those who have offered to help facilitate, or those who choose to set up and facilitate a group, face to face or virtual ...

In past programs the learning groups have varied in their effectiveness. Some have been very valuable for their members, to judge from their comments. On

some, the mail has been sparse and sporadic. Some haven't really operated at all. A lot seems to depend upon the willingness of people to help get it started.

So, the lists are there. Your effort will make them successful.

When you begin to exchange information, useful inclusions are:

- what you would like to get for yourself from the learning group — in other words, your learning goals (see below)
- what experience you have to offer other group members.

In the past, some learning groups have found it especially helpful to exchange telephone and fax numbers.

Three final thoughts on building community ...

First, I think people get to know each other through achieving a certain level of openness. It can be overdone — early and deep self-disclosure can scare people off. But appropriate self-disclosure can help to reveal something of the person behind the name and position. I believe this helps. And someone has to break the ice.

Second, I think a climate of mutual enquiry is much more helpful than one of competitiveness. Some people thrive in a hothouse of belligerence, but many are rendered entirely quiet. Combining openness with support seems to work well for more people, including some of those who may otherwise lurk in the shadows.

Third, some years ago I heard Reg Revans speak about action learning. One of the things he said stuck in my mind as particularly relevant. He said that learning groups worked when people were able to express their ignorance or confusion about what they were trying to do. They were then better able to learn, and to help each other to do so.

I offer these thoughts to you for your consideration. For all three I offer the observation that they seem to work best in the absence of compulsion. I think it's important that people are free to choose their own level of participation and disclosure.

Agreeing on goals

Relationship, discussed above, helps task accomplishment. But having a task can also help relationship. Most of the people who subscribe to areol and to the learning groups, I suspect, are busy people. I think many of them will be reluctant to spend time in much purely social interaction.

I suggested in the previous section that you let your group colleagues know what you hope to get out of the group. They will be best able to help you if they know this. In particular, what do you hope to learn from areol 15, and how do you hope to apply it?

As part of this, I suggest you tell them something (briefly!) about your project.

As you read other people's introductions and goals, you will find it helpful to note:

- similarities and differences between their project and yours
- experience and knowledge which they have which may be relevant to your goals and your project
- experience and knowledge which you have, and which appears to be relevant to your group colleagues' goals and interests.

I suggest you limit your project description to a couple of brief paragraphs at most. Some of you may also find it useful to prepare a somewhat longer description. If so, rather than post it to a discussion list, send it to me. I'll put it on the archive.

By the way, I don't think it's necessary that you all have the same goals. In fact, in their early days, action learning sets usually consisted of managers from different organisations, facing different problems, and with different learning needs. The diversity of a group was one of its assets.

Deciding how to function

I think this is the aspect of email groups about which we still have a lot to learn. For the most part, the questions to be addressed seem not all that different as for face to face groups. The answers may differ.

Here are some questions for you to consider:

1. How will you manage the facilitation? For example, how many facilitators? Who will start? How will the facilitation be shared?

   One possibility is to choose an initial facilitator from amongst those who are willing. You might then split the remaining weeks evenly over the other volunteers.

2. How will the responsibility be shared between the facilitator and the remaining group members? My strong recommendation is that *everyone*, facilitator or not, does what she [7] can to keep the process on track.

3. How will you manage the task? For instance, will you give some time to each person who has a project? Or will you deal with all projects at once, but focus on one aspect at a time? (I can see advantages and disadvantages in both.) Or what?

4. What are your *process* goals? — that is, what climate are you trying to create? As I said earlier, my favoured alternative is to aim for mutual education through a balance of openness and support.

7. Rather than use "she or he", which I find awkward, I will often use the feminine gender to represent feminine and masculine.

However, this is more easily said than done. How will you achieve whatever style you've chosen? How will you draw people's attention to styles of communication which undermine your chosen climate?

Other things you can do?

The membership of a group needn't be fixed. One of the learning groups in an early areol program invited a couple of people to join them for part of their discussion. This seemed to be very useful, and I think it's a pity that (to my knowledge) it hasn't happened since.

Another learning group organised an electronic weekend together. They set aside some time to allow a more intense period of communication than email usually provides. This, too, seemed to work well. (And it led to relationships which have been maintained and valued to this day.)

You may well have some other ideas that you can try out, with the agreement of the other members of the group.

Setting up your own learning group

As I indicated previously, you are welcome to set up your own learning group. If this can be done face to face with some colleagues, that could be a good option. Failing that, email complemented by occasional fax or phone can work well.

If you do this, and need any help, please let me know. (I'd be interested in hearing of any learning group formed, whether you wish for help or not.)

Please feel free to use the material more widely if it's useful. This can be electronically, or in hard copy. I ask only that you don't use it to make a profit, that you acknowledge its source, and that you identify the nature of any modifications.

The issues you will face in such a learning group are probably much as I've described above.

In summary ...

In this orientation session I've briefly described the learning groups. I've offered some suggestions for getting them off to a good start.

Whether you've joined an established group, or set up one of your own, I've suggested some important early tasks. Gathering them together here:

- make some quick decisions about an initial facilitator
- if you do not already know one another, spend a little time getting acquainted; as part of this, let each other know what each of you hopes to gain from the group
- describe your project or work to each other
- exchange information on your learning goals
- agree how you are going to operate as a group, especially about your style of interaction and if you are going to have a rotating facilitator.

If you have any problems or questions please let me know.

The next part of the orientation provides an overview of the sessions, and the associated resources from the archive.

c overview

... in which the 14 or so areol sessions, and the associated archived resources, are summarised. (In the spirit of action research, I think we should reserve the right to change our minds about this if that comes to appear desirable)

This chapter will serve two purposes. One is as an overview of the areol program. The other is a description of the files archived from the mailing list areol-r-l, an on line course in action research and evaluation. They can be retrieved either as web pages from http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/ or http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/. They are also available by anonymous ftp from ftp://www.scu.edu.au/www/arr/.

The web files are named areol-intro01.html to areol-intro04.html and areol-session01.html to areol-session14.html. Those on the ftp site are named areol-intro01.txt to areol-intro04.txt and areol-session01.txt to areol-session14.txt.

There are three orientation files, comprising this chapter and the two chapters preceding it. These are sent to people before the on line program begins, to help them prepare for the actual sessions.

Session a — areol00a. A welcome to the program and a summary of its structure. Action research is briefly described as a family of methods which pur-

sue the dual outcomes of action and research. The session also describes the content and structure of the workshops. It explains that the emphasis will be on a few specific models of action research. It describes how pointers to further reading will be given, including archived materials you can access. There will be suggestions for activities, and (for some) an accompanying discussion group

Session b — areol00b. An account of the learning groups, and how they may be started and maintained. The recommended early emphasis is on community building, agreeing about goals, and deciding about the process to be used.

Session c — areol00c. This chapter: an overview of the files and other resources — see above.

Session 1 gives a number of examples of action research, including practitioner or research activities for which action research is suitable.

Session 1 — areol01. A number of examples of action-research-like processes are given. Reference is made to two files describing action research case studies in more detail. A number of ways of describing action research are briefly mentioned. The main emphasis is on the combination of action and research, and on the cyclic nature.

Archived resources:

case1. An evaluation case study using convergent interviewing and focus groups to improve the quality of data and interpretations

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case1.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case1.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case1.txt

case2. An action case study in community consultation, demonstrating high stakeholder involvement

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case2.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case2.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case2.txt

arfaq. A partial "frequently-asked-questions" file

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/arfaq.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/arfaq.txt

guide. A beginners guide to action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/guide.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/guide.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/guide.txt

actlearn. The relationship between action research and action learning

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/actlearn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/actlearn.txt

Session 2 describes the overall change process

Session 2 — areol02. The change process and action research: a broad overview of processes for both action and research. The action is achieved by applying the principles of change — most often participative change. In planning and conducting action research, change and understanding can be achieved together, and each can assist the other.

Archived resources:

rigour. Methods of achieving rigour in situations also requiring flexibility

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour.html

http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour.txt

change. A more detailed description of the overall change process and its incorporation within action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/change.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/change.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/change.txt

choice. A brief account of some of the factors which might influence your choice of action research as a research methodology

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/choice.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/choice.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/choice.txt

philos. A paper by Pam Swepson on some of the philosophical underpinnings of research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/philos.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/philos.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/philos.txt

naive. An account of a naive philosophy of science, and its relationship to action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/naive.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/naive.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/naive.txt

Sessions 3 to 5 cover the important issues to do with entry and contracting, and participation and involvement

Session 3 — areol03. Entry and contracting. This session addresses the beginnings of an action research project. It suggests that the important elements of the start of a project are the forming of close and trusting relationships, and the negotiation of goals and roles. It suggests that entry and contracting are

ongoing, repeated from time to time, and for each new client who becomes involved

Archived resources:

communicn. An overview of communication skills for expression and listening, and for managing the overall process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/communicn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/communicn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/communicn.txt

argyris. A summary by Liane Anderson of the views of Chris Argyris. In particular it deals with the difference between what we think we believe, and the beliefs that might be deduced from our actions

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/argyris.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/argyris.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/argyris.txt

valwb. A summary of a workbook exercise, based on concepts from Argyris, which enables the analysis of a situation which you didn't handle as well as you would wish

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/valwb.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/valwb.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/valwb.txt

Session 4 — areol04. Participation and involvement. Different varieties of stakeholders are identified, as are different levels of involvement. This session provides some overall concepts in preparation for the next, more practical, session

Archived resources:

stake. A description of a process for stakeholder analysis. It helps you to decide when you need more information about a stakeholder, and which stakeholders it is most important to involve

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/stake.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/stake.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/stake.txt

partproc. In this file I identify seven different functions in which participants might become involved. I suggest that, for each function, a different decision about who to involve may be made.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/partproc.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/partproc.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/partproc.txt

comcon. This file, in the form of a checklist, guides the reader through the design of a process for community consultation

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/comcon.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/comcon.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/comcon.txt

involv. This file outlines some of the issues in creating involvement in an organisational setting

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/involv.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/involv.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/involv.txt

partic. A brief listing prepared by Vikki Uhlmann of the main advantages of participation

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/partic.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/partic.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/partic.txt

Session 5 — areol05. Achieving participation. Applying the principles of the two preceding sessions, this session describes in more detail how high involvement can be achieved. In particular, it addresses the selection of representatives, the need for communication between them and other stakeholders, and ways of building high-quality involvement into group work.

Archived resources:

focus. A form of focus group, more than usually structured to increase data quality, to involve participants more in interpretation, and to allow more diverse participants to be involved in a group

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/focus.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/focus.txt

consulpro. A resource document for members of consultative groups. It contains some general advice, and brief descriptions of some useful participative processes

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/consulpro.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/consulpro.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/consulpro.txt

localmeet. Gives a step-by-step process for organising neighbourhood meetings, local meetings hosted by a member of the community, and capable of achieving high participation rates

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/localmeet.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/localmeet.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/localmeet.txt

gfa. This describes a participative and action-oriented version of group feedback analysis, a small group survey technique which can be substituted for a large-sample written survey with data feedback

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/gfa.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/gfa.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/gfa.txt

dtuwb. A file based on the "Discussing the undiscussable" workbook. It can be used to help a small group or learning group learn more about the factors that inhibit openness and directness of communication

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/dtuwb.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/dtuwb.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/dtuwb.txt

Some action research is done mainly for the action. Sessions 2 to 5, above, dealt primarily with issues more relevant in such research. Other action research is more for the research than the action.

Session 6 addresses ways of achieving rigour. It also refers to archived resources relevant to action research for publication, or for theses.

Session 6 — areol06. Achieving rigour. A number of ways of increasing the rigour of action research are discussed. These include: the use of multiple cycles which alternate action with critical reflection; combining data collection and interpretation; and the use of later cycles to test the data and interpretations from earlier cycles. Overall, the emphasis is on the vigorous pursuit of disconfirming evidence and interpretations.

Archived resources:

rigour. This describes, from a practitioner's perspective, why experimental and quasi-experimental methods are often hard to apply in field settings

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour.txt

rigour2. Explains how rigour and economy of effort can both be improved without sacrificing flexibility

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour2.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour2.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour2.txt

phd. A brief account of one approach to action research for thesis purposes; it offers some suggestions for checking that your study is adequate both as a change process and a research process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/phd.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/phd.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/phd.txt

research. Action research for publication and for theses, with particular attention to documentation and writing-up

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/research.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/research.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/research.txt

Sessions 7 to 9 introduce the topic of process design, and illustrate it through a variety of processes which can be used for data collection and analysis in action research.

Session 7 — areol07. This session provides a categorisation of process types. It distinguishes between adversarial, consensual and dialectic processes, and recommends using either consensual or dialectical. Consensual process work when agreement is easily established. Dialectical processes are indicated where agreement is substantial: they create agreement from disagreement. Delphi, a forecasting technique drawing on a panel of experts, is used to illustrate some of the features of dialectical processes

Archived resources:

dialectic. This document offers a slightly extended discussion of adversarial, consensual and dialectical processes

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/dialectic.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/dialectic.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/dialectic.txt

delphi. Descriptions of a conventional delphi, conducted by mail, and a face-to-face version

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/delphi.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/delphi.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/delphi.txt

Session 8 — areol08. Convergent interviewing is an example of a style of interviewing which includes dialectical processes as a way of developing a higher quality of information and interpretation. Like delphi, it attempts to resolve disagreements. It does this by developing probe questions which delve for deeper information and interpretations from interview to interview.

Archived resources:

iview. This document provides a more detailed description of a typical interview, and of a series of interviews

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/iview.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/iview.txt

Session 9 —areol09. This session returns to the theme of simultaneous action and research. It uses a more structured form of focus group to demonstrate how higher involvement and a better quality of data can be achieved at the same time.

Archived resources:

focus. This was mentioned earlier; it gives a detailed description of structured focus groups

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/focus.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/focus.txt

communicn. This was also mentioned earlier; it provides some helpful suggestions to aid the researcher facilitating a group process such as focus groups

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/communicn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/communicn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/communicn.txt

Some other archived resources (not specifically mentioned in this session but some mentioned in previous sessions) describe various forms of data collection:

voting. The use of voting techniques to collapse long lists, or arrange them in priority

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/voting.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/voting.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/voting.txt

delphi. Mentioned previously, a dialectic process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/delphi.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/delphi.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/delphi.txt

gfa. Group feedback analysis is an alternative to survey-feedback

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/gfa.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/gfa.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/gfa.txt

search. A future oriented goal-setting or visioning process which can be used for data collection when agreement is likely to be easily reached

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/search.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/search.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/search.txt

options. A dialectical process for choosing between two alternatives

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/options.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/options.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/options.txt

Sessions 10 to 12 deal specifically with an action research style of evaluation. They apply the previously-discussed principles to evaluation, using a particular detailed process (the Snyder process) as a vehicle

Session 10 — areol10. Evaluation as action research. The features of action research, described in earlier sessions, are noted here as relevant for evaluation

too. The motives of the evaluator and those who employ her are also identified as important.

Archived resources:

qualeval. A document which uses a particular evaluation process (the Snyder process) to illustrate some of the features of qualitative action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/qualeval.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/qualeval.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/qualeval.txt

Some bibliographic resources which contain references to evaluation literature are also mentioned:

meta-eval-bib. A bibliography prepared by Patricia Rogers, containing references to evaluation and meta-evaluation literature

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/meta-eval-bib.txt

trdbooks.txt. A bibliography prepared by Marcia Connor on books on training and development, some of them relevant to evaluation

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/trdbooks.txt

biblio. A general action research bibliography, also referencing other material (such as qualitative research) relevant to action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/biblio.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/biblio.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/biblio.txt

Session 11 — areol11. Describes the Snyder evaluation process. This is a process which combines formative and summative evaluation with the design of mechanisms for ongoing monitoring and improvement.

Archived resources:

snyder. This is a fairly detailed description of the process, with a rational given for most steps of the process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder.txt

snyder-b. This is a briefer description of the same process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder-b.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder-b.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder-b.txt

darts. Describes an activity to help you think about some of the dimensions of performance appraisal and feedback, and therefore about evaluation feedback. It was emailed to you just before session 13 if you are a subscriber to the one-semester email version of areol

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/darts.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/darts.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/darts.txt

Session 12 — areol12. Examines in a little more detail two aspects of the Snyder process: the comparisons within the process evaluation phase, and the development and use of performance indicators. The Snyder process is also briefly compared to Total Quality Management, and to appraisal processes.

The relevant archived resources are those listed above for areol01

Session 13 examines a different action research process, soft systems methodology

Session 13 — areol13. Soft systems methodology. This action research methodology is first described, and its use as an evaluation process is then considered.

Archived resources:

sofsys2. Uses soft systems methodology to illustrate some of the ways in which rigour can be achieved in action research processes

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/sofsys2.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/sofsys2.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/sofsys2.txt

Finally, session 14 provides some suggestions for follow-up through reading

Session 14 — areol14. Where now? A number of relevant electronic mailing lists for action research and evaluation are identified. Other resources are also mentioned, including some archived resources, and the booklist in the archived file ar-biblio is updated.

Archived resources:

al-biblio. A bibliography on action learning, compiled by Shankar Sankaran

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/al-biblio.txt

biblio. An annotated bibliography on action research, including also some references on other qualitative research, and some evaluation

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/biblio.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/biblio.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/biblio.txt

rschlit. A brief bibliography on alternative research methods

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rschlit.txt

meta-eval-bib. A bibliography on meta-evaluation, arranged by category, compiled by Patricia Rogers

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/meta-eval-bib.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/meta-eval-bib.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/meta-eval-bib.txt

trdbooks. A list of books, compiled by Marcia Conner, recommended by members of the trdev-l (training and development) list as their favourite books

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/trdbooks.html

1 applications

... in which some typical applications of action research and related methodologies are discussed, and typical action research processes are briefly described

A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session01.html

Think for a moment about the various activities you do in the course of a day. As you read through the examples below, watch out for similarities to your own activities. Perhaps you can describe what *you* are doing as action research ... and, having done that, perhaps you can use action research processes and concepts to improve and understand what you are doing and how you are doing it

In this session:

- Some brief examples of action-research-like activities
- A brief description of an action research process

I've briefly explained in the orientation, and in abstract terms, my understanding of action research. But what is it in *practical* terms?

Consider the following examples ...

You are a practitioner working in a community. You are isolated from most of your profession. Strongly committed to your professional development, you find few opportunities for it. You wish to improve your practice.

You decide that the conventional opportunities in your area are not promising.

You adopt a regular practice, each evening, of spending 15 minutes in critical reflection. First you recall, in as much detail as you can, the events of the day. In particular, you note those events which did not work out as well as you would like.

You identify what you have learnt from each experience. Then you review the likely events on the following day. You look for opportunities to apply the learning from the previous day.

You could call what you are doing "experiential learning". If that sounds a bit fancy, you could call it "professional development". You could also describe it as action research. [8]

You are a member of a small rural community. In recent years the local government has made several decisions which disadvantage you. When you complain, you are ignored.

8. Some writers insist on publication as a necessary component of action research.

You decide to study the situation, so that you can act with better understanding. You also decide that you will try to build closer relationships with the local politicians who seem not to understand your situation. If they don't understand you, you reason, at least you can begin to understand them.

Through these activities you learn more about your own situation and the situation of the politicians and other interest groups. You are eventually able to have more influence in local decision making.

This might be called "social activism". Or "conscientisation". Or (done in certain ways) "action research".

You work as an experienced practitioner in a large public sector organisation. Your boss is pressuring you to upgrade your qualifications. With the increased workload in your job, though, you don't think you have the time to seek further qualifications.

Because of your experience, you are often given the more demanding assignments. This, too, militates against study.

An idea occurs to you. Perhaps you can use your work as a vehicle for research for a higher degree. You enrol at a university which provides supervision for applied qualitative research.

You identify a number of forthcoming work assignments which are related. In each, you work participatively with those most affected to develop an effective approach. With their help, you document and review your process.

You also reflect upon and document your individual experience regularly. In time, you submit it as a thesis.

You could call this "study" or "upgrading your qualifications". You could also describe it as action research.

You are chief executive officer of a medium sized organisation. The organisation, faced with unexpected change in the market, suffers from low profits. There is high turnover amongst key staff. You would like to do something about it.

With your management team, you plan to meet weekly to improve what you are doing. A member of the team suggests that you don't always learn effectively from each other, or from your own experience. You believe this is true, and wish to take it into account.

Each week, the team reviews the progress of the previous week. As chief executive, you make a point of giving praise to those subordinates who have experienced problems and learned from them. Over time, the openness of the group increases.

You have now reached a stage where the managerial skills of the team have visibly improved. Learning is more effective. You attribute this to the willingness to be open, to learn from past experience, and to apply what you have learned.

You could call this "good team management" or "organisational learning". You could also describe it as action research.

At the end of each meeting, you review that meeting. You and your colleagues identify the strengths and weaknesses of the way the meeting was conducted. You then plan changes to your meeting procedures in the light of this review.

This might be called "group facilitation", or "improving meeting procedures". Here, too, you could describe it as action research.

The four situations above vary on a range of dimensions: the number of people directly involved; their motivations; the activities which are being improved; the uses made of what is learned; and so on.

Some of them also pick up other themes in current literature — I've identified experiential learning and the learning organisation, among others.

But that's to be expected. Human activity systems, as Peter Checkland calls them, are complex. They don't fit easily into just one or two (or twenty) clear categories.

How many of these resemble activities which you could easily combine with your daily work or life?

The examples above *could* be labelled as action research. Activities like them frequently are.

There has been enough bad research labelled as "action research". I'd prefer not to add to that. Unless they use a cyclic process which alternates action and critical reflection they don't fit my preferred definition.

What would you have to do to make your reflection systematic and critical enough that you could have faith in your conclusions?

Or consider these ...

You are a teacher or an academic with a busy teaching schedule. You would like to improve your teaching. At the same time, you think it would enhance your chances of promotion if you could also publish more.

You institute a number of procedures to satisfy both of these wishes. You reach agreement with your classes that they will provide regular, evidence-based and thoughtful feedback to you. In return you offer to implement as many of their

suggestions as you can. You also offer to explain when and why you can't follow their suggestions.

This leads to immediate improvement from week to week. As well, you conduct a major evaluation at the end of each class. This leads to improvement from semester to semester.

You publish your experiences in a journal for higher education.

There are many ways of describing what you are doing, including "student centred learning" and "reflective teaching" and "publishing". And action research.

You work as a consultant in private practice. You specialise in providing help with strategic planning for voluntary organisations.

You have begun working with one of these organisations. After some weeks the director approaches you with a request that you document your experience. Your assistance has been very useful. The director would like other organisations to benefit from the processes you use.

You are interested. But you would like to be assured that the material you document is of sufficient quality. You ask the director if the organisation is willing to help you critique and refine the processes you use.

You have been working closely with a small working party from within the organisation. At your request they agree that you will document your planning meetings in such a way that you can track the relative successes and failures of your planning. They also agree to help you validate and refine your processes by interviewing other organisational members about the strengths and weaknesses of the strategic planning.

You prepare a draft. The working party members critique it for you. They help you make it more suitable for your target audience. You publish it as joint editors.

Again there are many labels you could apply to this, most prominently "education" or "publication". You could also describe it as action research

Local people from a poor community approach you. They ask you to help them solve some specific problems with their housing.

You believe that the housing problems are symptoms of their general disadvantage. You suspect that they do not understand the ways in which the wider society acts unwittingly to disadvantage them. If they did realise this, you think they could remedy more than just their housing problems.

With their agreement, you engage them as co-researchers into the problem. Through regular critical reflection they come to understand their situation better. They are able in time to act politically to overcome some of their disadvantage.

You could describe what you (and they) are doing as "empowerment" or "do-it-yourself social research" or "community development" or "citizen participation" or ... even action research.

I could add: "You offer an on line course in action research and evaluation ...".

What *is* action research?

In the orientation session, I described action research as action *and* research. I regard it as a family of processes which allow the dual pursuit of action, or change, and research, or understanding.

I would add critical reflection as another essential or nearly-essential characteristic. Action research can be regarded as a cyclic process which alternates between action and critical reflection.

... action → reflection → action → reflection ...

There are other features which various people regard as essential. Some, for example, believe that action research must be participative. I have heard it argued that it must be at least partly qualitative. There are some who believe that it must be published. For me, these are choices.

Later sessions explore some of these issues further.

I mention these matters, not to persuade you to a point of view, but rather to indicate the approach taken in this program. It's simpler, I think, if I'm open about my own preferences and speak from my own experience. But I have a strong preference that you judge my ideas on their merits. I hope you take into account their relevance to your own situation.

In short, I assume you will make up your own mind.

Most descriptions of action research stress its cyclic or spiral nature. Perhaps the most common is the cycle we might call the Deakin model: first planning, then action, then observation, then reflection; then back to planning and the beginning of the next cycle:

... plan → act → observe → reflect → plan ...

A similar version captures the alternation between action and reflection mentioned above. In turn, reflection consists of a review of the previous action followed by planning for the next action:

... intend —> act —> review —> intend ...

For example, imagine that I am facilitating a process in the classroom. (That's what I was doing this morning, before I returned to revising this material.)

Each time before I do or say something I try to be aware of my purpose. "What am I trying to achieve here?"

Then I act.

Then I observe. Did I achieve what I intended? Are people carrying out the instructions given, and look as if they understood? What worked? What didn't?

Do I need to do or say it again, in a different way?

Another way of describing the spiral captures for me the unavoidable uncertainty of change programs. In this model, the process begins with broad and general questions, using general (or "fuzzy") methods. In all probability, this will yield only fuzzy answers. But that is enough to allow more precise questions and methods in the next cycle:

... fuzzy questions → fuzzy methods → fuzzy answers → less fuzzy questions ...

In other words, I think of action research as an iterative process. It converges towards a better understanding of the situation. The better understanding allows improved action.

For example, suppose I am beginning a diagnostic process using interviewing. In the early interviews I ask only broad questions, and few of them. Most of my effort goes into encouraging my informants to keep talking.

It is only in the later interviews that I have a better understanding of the situation and of the questions that would be usefully answered. Then, after an open ended start, I ask more specific questions.

(See the description of this style of interviewing at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html)

Here is a different way of classifying action research: in terms of the main emphasis. You might choose two categories ...

One, action *research*, emphasises the research component. The important aim is to build better understanding. Change may also be pursued, but is less a priority.

The second might be called *action* research. It pursues change as its first priority. If there are research outcomes too, that is a bonus.

There are examples of both of these above.

Whatever the variety of action research, both change and understanding are usually desirable.

To someone steeped in experimental research methodologies those two aims might appear to be in opposition. For me, one of the defining features of action research is that it allows both to be achieved, and often achieved well.

Further, it seems to me that action and research *can* enhance each other. On balance, it is when action is well informed by research that it is most likely to be effective. In addition, it is when a system is undergoing change that its dynamics are most apparent, and often therefore most easily understood.

The examples above are brief. Two extended case studies have been placed on the areol archive.

The first is an evaluation study. It is not very participative: the people take part mainly as informants. The emphasis is on careful data collection and interpretation. It illustrates a form of action research in which the research outcomes are given highest priority.

If you use ftp or other net software you can access it on the Southern Cross site. It is available in both text and hypertext (that is, as a web page). The URLs are

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case1.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case1.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case1.txt

The second is a decision-making exercise involving people in many different interest groups, with many different interests and positions. The emphasis is on reaching decisions which have wide acceptance. High participation is therefore pursued, despite the difficulties of doing so. It is an example of action research in which the action is the main focus.

The URLs are

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case2.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case2.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case2.txt

Other resource files will be mentioned from time to time. Substituting their filename for "case2" retrieves them, by ftp or on the web.

Other archived resources which deal with action research:

arfaq. A partial "frequently-asked-questions" file

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arfaq.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/arfaq.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/arfaq.txt

guide. A beginners guide to action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/guide.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/guide.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/guide.txt

actlearn. The relationship between action research and action learning

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/actlearn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/actlearn.txt

Activities

A thought experiment

Think back over a typical day or week. Consider these questions:

- To judge from the earlier examples and the two archived cases, how much of what you do can be regarded as action research? Does it include critical reflection within a cyclic process?
- Is it *action* research, or action *research*? Can you improve it by strengthening the weaker component? Can you improve it by integrating the action and research components more?
- How much critical reflection do you engage in? In what ways might more, or more regular, critical reflection improve your practice and your understanding? How might you do that?

An individual activity

During the next week, set aside in your diary at least 10 minutes at the end of each day. Use this time for critical reflection on the day's activities.

A later session will suggest a more detailed format for critical reflection. For now, you may find the following three steps useful:

- Recall the day in as much detail and vividness as you can. (You can include family and social activities, not just work)
- Identify some surprises or unexpected results, and what you learned from them
- Devise some future way of putting the new learning to work

For your learning group

When your learning groups are set up, there are a number of tasks suggested for you in the orientation sessions. Important are: getting to know each other;

deciding what outcomes you want from the learning group; deciding how you will operate together.

If you have done that, it would be useful for you to exchange detailed information on your projects. You can then decide the order in which you will work through them.

Some ways of carrying out these early learning group activities were included in the second orientation file.

———

This session has provided a number of brief examples of situations which might be described as action research. In addition it has pointed the way to two more detailed case studies. One displays an emphasis on research through careful data collection and interpretation. The other emphasises action by pursuing high participant involvement.

This will be a recurring theme: action research as action *and* research.

In addition, I've provided a number of descriptions of action research. These emphasised its cyclic nature.

The next session explores this further, and examines how change can be achieved.

Most sessions will be followed by a trigger question or comment. On the email version these help to enliven the discussion on the mailing list. Here they may offer you some food for thought. Here is the first one ...

In session 1 I provide a number of examples of what might be called action research (and there are some extended examples on the archive). In some instances, these might not fit some people's definitions of action research.

I then mention a number of cycles which can be used to describe action research:

plan → act → observe → reflect ...

intend → act → review ...

fuzzy questions → fuzzy methods → fuzzy answers ...

There is a danger here, though, that these will be regarded as *the* way to do action research.

The danger lies in trying to do good action research, on the presumption that it is, by definition, good research. For me, good research is research which does what it is intended to do. It achieves the intended outcomes in the research situation. Sometimes, but not always, action research is the way to do that.

How well does this fit with your understanding of action research, and any action research projects you are involved in?

2 the change process

... in which the change process, and the role of action research, are briefly described. The focus of this program is identified as being processes for pursuing change and understanding at the same time

A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session02.html

Consider your project, if you have one. Or think of some other activity which is intended to lead to both improvement and learning. If you knew nothing about any form of research, how might you approach it? You might begin by thinking of it as a change process, and devise ways of improving the learning. Or you might think of it as a research process, and then look for ways of building more effective change into it.

In this session, three sets of concepts will be addressed.

- The first of them discusses reasons for choosing action research.
- Then follows a brief overview of the change process.

- Finally, I discuss ways in which the dual aims of change and understanding can be achieved.

Why action research?

As I've said in the earlier material action research is designed for a dual purpose: to yield change (the "action ") and understanding (the "research ") at the same time. That it is able to do so is one of its key strengths.

You can view action research as a family of processes for combined action and research. Consider this ...

- Change often requires flexibility and participation.
- Research depends upon high quality data and accurate interpretations.

Often it's useful to be able to meet both these conditions. Action research is designed to allow you to do so.

Please note that I'm not arguing for action research as "the best " research methodology. Nor am I arguing for this version of action research over different versions. Different methods of research or action research achieve different purposes.

Sometimes you may wish to identify causal relationships between relatively limited numbers of variables. Then my suggestion is that you first examine experimental methods. Or, if you have to take the study into the field, use those quasi-experimental methods which are robust. (In my view many of the simpler ones are not.)

For example, you may wish to know whether a certain medication achieved its intended results. You could be most confident of the answer you obtained if you used a carefully planned and conducted experimental design.

Sometimes you may wish to understand a complex culture on its own terms. It may be your wish to have as little impact on the culture as possible. I'd then expect your first choice, more often than not, to be ethnography or related methods.

A friend of mine is studying chat rooms on the internet. It isn't part of her intention to change them, only understand them. Her choice of ethnographic methods is therefore appropriate.

(I'm not saying that the various research paradigms are limited to these uses. Ethnographic methods and quasi-experimental approaches, among others, have been used effectively in change situations.)

Action research has a number of uses quite apart from its applicability to change programs. It's strength, I think, is its emergent nature. It takes form slowly, informed by the growing understanding of those using it. It takes as little as possible for granted, so that participants can be open to the data they collect.

This is what allows action research to be flexible and responsive enough to be used in change programs. The same quality often allows it to be effective for pilot research, for example.

In some forms, it can deal well with very complex situations. There, the nature of the situation cannot be identified ahead of time. The emergent nature of action research is valuable.

(For similar reasons, I think of action research as a useful "meta-methodology ". If I don't know enough to choose a suitable methodology, I can use action research until I have enough understanding to make the choice.)

As my colleague Pam Swepson would say, following John Dewey, fitness of function is the appropriate criterion for choosing a research paradigm.

(By the way, I would rather avoid any debate about the mixing of paradigms. Personally, I think it's fine if you know what you are doing. Some disagree.)

What do you want to achieve? Which paradigm will best achieve it? For me, those are the important questions in choosing an approach.

If you have a project which you are using as a case study for areol 15, how well does action research fit that project? If you are familiar with other methodologies, which of them might you use instead? What would be the relative advantages and disadvantages of doing that?

As it is, the boundaries between one research paradigm and another are often unclear. If researchers were to choose all aspects of their research more carefully, this would be even more so. There are many dimensions on which a research design can differ.

In my view, the best research involves making informed choices on each of these dimensions. The aim, I suggest, is not to do "action research". It is to do *effective* research. And effectiveness, I presume, is defined by situation and desired outcomes.

The "best" action research may well borrow processes and approaches from other paradigms, if that is what the situation and the desired outcomes require. Many action researchers I know are pragmatists. If it works in practice they use it.

In my own action research work I draw on many of the processes used in community and organisational change. I find those processes fit well with the action research approach.

The process of change

As I've said, other research paradigms can be used in change situations. Action research, however, is often an appropriate choice. After all, it is intended to lead to change while studying it.

As you might expect, some aspects of a good action research project are directed mostly towards achieving change. Other aspects try to assure the quality of data and interpretations. For the moment, consider the requirements for change ...

There is a large literature (I mention some of it below) on ways of achieving change. Much of it is written from the viewpoint of a consultant or facilitator — a person who helps others achieve the change they desire. This seems akin to some of what an action researcher has to do.

The overall shape of a change process is often described as a number of distinct stages. For example:

- entry and contracting; here you enter the client system and negotiate your role and theirs;
- diagnosis; here you (and they) decide what requires remedy or change;
- intervention; here the remedy is put in place;
- closure; here you withdraw from the system.

(It's common for "evaluation" to be inserted between intervention and closure. It is a bias of mine that evaluation is better done continuously. Evaluation — in the form of critical reflection — is built into each action research cycle. I think that that is part of the reason why action research can be effective for its dual purposes.)

I think that this four-stage model is a useful simplification. Or rather, I think it's useful if you remember it's a simplification. In fact, the stages overlap greatly. There is often a need to retrace your steps to an earlier stage.

Entry and contracting, for example ... It seems to me that this is needed *throughout* many change programs. Each time a new client or informant or participant is identified, there is a new relationship to be formed; there are new roles to be negotiated.

For that matter, I have yet to encounter an important relationship (in consulting or elsewhere) that didn't require some renegotiation from time to time.

I think of it like this. Ultimately, when it comes to facilitating change, all I have to work with is myself. I am the only person I can influence directly and predictably. However, if I change my own behaviour, I will in turn change others. It may not be in predictable ways; but it will usually occur.

The quality of your relationship with others is important. It will help them to decide whether to trust you and your processes. Your processes enable them to develop a better understanding of their situation, and make better use of the understanding they already have.

Apollo 13

I have heard an interesting story about Apollo 13. I don't know how true it is; but I can use it to illustrate the point.

Apollo 13 was the moon expedition that almost ended in disaster. There was an explosion in a computer panel. The astronauts lost control of the module: they were faced with circling the earth as a satellite forever. The NASA engineers could not solve the problem.

According to the story, a problem solving consultant was called in. The consultant knew nothing of the relevant computer technology, or space navigation, or whatever other technical knowledge was required. But the consultant's process allowed the engineers to pool their knowledge and their experience.

It is true that the problem was solved. The astronauts returned safely to earth.

In a sense, as action researchers we are often in the position of the consultant (real or imagined) in the Apollo 13 instance. We have processes that help people identify problems more effectively, set better goals, develop better plans. All of these also depend upon better diagnosis (one of the practitioner's labels for research).

And often, the consultant helps the clients to *plan* action. The action often happens later.

Planning, in turn, can be done most effectively when people have some prior understanding. It's a bit like planning a travel route — and in some respects that is what change is, a journey. You first have to know where you are, and where you want to go. It also helps to know something of the terrain between here and there, though it helps to be a bit flexible about this.

So, here is a slightly different version of the change process.

Phase A. Pre-planning: identify the stakeholders and set up your personal and working relationships with them

1. build relationships
2. negotiate roles and responsibilities
3. build a climate for change
4. agree on mechanisms for participation

Phase B. Planning: help people determine what needs to be done

5. goal setting or visioning (or both)
6. situation analysis or problem-solving
7. action planning (including planning for ongoing evaluation)

Phase C. Action: implementing the planned changes, checking that they are effective, and modifying them as needed

8. action and on-going monitoring

In other words ... First you build relationships, with clear roles. Then you analyse the situation and decide what outcomes you wish for and what actions to take. Then you act.

And again, I wouldn't want you to think that it's as simple as that. In practice it isn't a linear sequence. But it will serve our purpose for the present. We can develop it further in later sessions.

Now, how can change be pursued so that understanding is also achieved?

Action and research

With the foregoing as background we can begin to explore how the two elements of action and research can be combined.

Participants

You can usually assume that people are more committed to their own decisions than to other people's. For effective action, then, the appropriate participants include those who can enable or prevent the desired change. All else being equal, in most situations these are the people who will be affected by the change, and those who will have to implement it.

(A later session describes a simple procedure which can help to plan your approach to these. It is called "stakeholder analysis ".)

For effective research, you have to have some way of accessing those who have the information necessary to understand the system.

So, change is more likely to occur if certain people are involved. And you are likely to collect better or more complete data if certain other people are involved.

It tends to be true that the two groups overlap. Those most affected by the change are often almost the same as those who best understand the system to be changed. (I don't recommend that you assume this is always true.)

In organisational settings, for example, it is often the people at the workface who are asked to change. And they are the people who often best understand their work, and their situation.

I would offer a rough generalisation: the more *diverse* the people you involve, the more likely you are to collect enough of the relevant information.

You may also choose to involve people for other reasons: values, for instance. As an example, you may place a high value on participation in its own right. You may therefore choose to involve people who are not needed either for effective change, or effective understanding.

We'll visit this important topic again.

Methodology

For research outcomes, the most effective methodology is the one which generates appropriate information and understanding. For change, you want a methodology which generates commitment to the change.

It is here that the cyclic nature of action research plays an important part. Consider what happens within each cycle, and also from cycle to cycle ...

I've mentioned previously two varieties of action research cycle. The Deakin cycle consists of

plan → act → observe → reflect

The important feature here is alternating action and critical reflection in an ongoing cycle. It could be simplified to

action → critical reflection

It is theory and practice integrated. Action and understanding integrated.

In the Deakin cycle, planning can be thought of as reflection before action. Observation is reflection during action. Reflection is reflection after action.

I also mentioned, as a cycle that captures the progression from cycle to cycle

fuzzy questions → fuzzy methods → fuzzy answers

This leads in successive cycles to less fuzzy questions, methods and answers.

The later cycles test and refine the conclusions, and the actions, from earlier cycles. The continuing testing of theory in action adds to understanding.

All else being equal, the better the information and interpretation, the better the decisions. The better the decisions, the better the decided actions. But this is true only if the processes generate accurate data, good understanding, good planning, and commitment to the decisions.

And what about philosophy?

I have been asked what role philosophy plays in all this. My own answer (many would disagree) is, not very much. Very little of the philosophy I have read has given me much reason to change my practice.

(However, there are two relevant files in the archive: philos and naive, mentioned below.) There is a strong tradition of pragmatism in action research. I feel at home within that tradition.

Archived resources

For some of the reasons for choosing action research as your paradigm, see rigour in the arlist archive.

On change, see change in the same archive. If you sometimes wonder if your research is action research, see choice. On philosophy, see philos and naive. On integrating the action and the research see aandr.

Web versions are available at:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/change.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/change.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/choice.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/choice.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/philos.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/philos.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/naive.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/naive.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/aandr.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/aandr.html

If you are using anonymous ftp the URLs are:

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour.txt
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/change.txt
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/choice.txt
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/philos.txt
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/naive.txt

The text version of aandr is to be found at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ascii/aandr.txt or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/ascii/aandr.txt

Other reading

There is an extensive literature on the practicalities of change. For organisational change, the literature on organisational development is relevant. A good starting point, written from an explicit action research perspective, is:

French, W., and Bell, C.H. (1998) *Organisation development: behavioral science interventions for organisational improvement*, sixth edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. [Earlier editions are fine too.]

For change in community settings, you might try this book of readings:

Cox, F.M., Erlich, J.L., Rothman, J., and Tropman, J.E., eds. (1987) *Strategies for community organisation: a book of readings*, fourth edition. Itasca: Peacock.

Because of the careful attention it gives to the people side of action research, I am impressed by:

Oja, S.N. and Smulyan, L. (1989) *Collaborative action research: a developmental approach*. London: Falmer Press.

Activities

A thought experiment

Identify some past changes (any sort of changes) of which you approved, and some you resisted. Identify the similarities and differences. What principles of change would you draw from this?

Bonus questions for the enthusiasts: How well integrated were the action and research components? How involved were you in researching, planning and implementing the change?

An individual activity

During the next several days, act more *intentionally*. Try to be aware, before acting, of the outcomes you hope your action will achieve. Note how often you achieve them. Note how you behave when you don't achieve them.

For your learning group

You may have already given some attention to getting to know one another in your learning groups. And you may have begun to exchange information about your projects. If not, these are useful early priorities.

Recall that your task is to help one another to learn from your experience, with your projects and elsewhere.

Help each other to consider your projects. Be clear about the desired outcomes. Begin to plan ways of achieving a balance of action and research through participation and process.

In this session I've suggested that action research is most suited to those occasions where action and research are both desired. Action research is action and research. Change and understanding.

(I've also mentioned that as an emergent methodology it can be used in uncertain or complex settings, or as a meta-methodology.)

The action is achieved by applying the principles of change — most often participative change.

In planning and conducting action research, change and understanding can be achieved together. Further, each can assist the other. Planning for both can lead to better decisions about participation, and can make good use of the cyclic nature of action research.

Next sessions: participation and ways of achieving it.

In areol session 2 I claimed that action and research can be done in ways which allow each to reinforce the other.

It is in trying to change the system that one often uncovers data and meanings which are not usually apparent. For instance, it seems to me that the cultural dimensions of social systems often become more apparent during periods of change.

It is in doing critical research that one develops the understanding to develop better plans for change. For example, disconfirming evidence, or ambiguous or contradictory evidence, can often lead participants to a better understanding. This in turn allows the change program to be better anchored in reality rather than in fantasy.

However, I think it is true that old habits can interfere with this. My recollections of the form of research I was taught as an undergraduate can interfere with my ability to do effective action research. So can some of my past practices as a consultant.

Is this your experience? If it is, what can you do about it?

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3 entry and contracting

... in which entry and contracting are identified as crucial early steps in an effective action research project, forming good relationships is identified as part of this, and some suggestions for communicating well are given. [9]

How influenced are you by first impressions? What sort of first impressions do others form of you? If you have been involved in recent projects, how have they begun, and what effect did that have on the rest of the project? As you read this, I invite you to think about recent *beginnings* that you have experienced.

In this session:

- entry and contracting;
- early priorities — forming relationships, and negotiating goals and roles; and
- communication.

9. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session03.html

This and the sessions following are closely related. The combined topic is participation and involvement — for action; and for research.

Participation isn't just a matter of who you talk to. It depends, too, on the quality of relationship you can create at the outset, and maintain. It is influenced by the style of communication you use and the processes for decision-making.

Action researchers are change agents. Their most important tools, I believe, are their own skills and processes; that is how they impact upon others. And their impact is often determined in the early minutes or hours of contact with a client.

So that's where we'll start: at entry and contracting.

(The next session will then examine some of the ways in which relevant people can be involved in action research. This will take us into a more detailed consideration of the possible roles of researcher and client; and then, in the session after that, into mechanisms for participation or representation.)

Entry and contracting

In many of the change programs I have been involved in, problems have occurred. In almost all instances some of the seeds of the problems could be traced to the initial contracting. I did something or omitted something which created false or unreal or unconstructive expectations.

It's clear enough, I suppose, that beginnings are important. It is then that expectations are formed. It is then that impressions and relationships are most influenced by single actions and events.

It seems that there is almost never enough time to contract thoroughly. It is too difficult to anticipate all of what might happen. What I leave out returns to make my life difficult. But I can't always tell what can be left out and what can't.

I now use a twofold strategy to deal with this. First, I try to concentrate on the *most* important aspects of my relationship with clients. (I don't expect that I will always get this right.)

Second, I try to ensure that we have the sort of relationship that can weather the issues which nevertheless arise. In this, trust and openness and flexibility are important.

Action research is an emergent process. It develops gradually as understanding grows. In a flexible and responsive process like this, plans can be expected to change. Relationships must then sometimes change too.

There are a number of steps to this style of contracting. First I gain access to the "stakeholders", the people with a stake in the research. Second, I do what I can to form effective relationships with them. Third, I negotiate goals, and my role(s) and theirs.

In all of this, my aim is to create the relationships — personal relationships and working relationships — which will best enable me to achieve my desired outcomes. My wish is for the clients to achieve *their* outcomes. I'll assume that your wish is similar.

Let me tell you about my favourite metaphor for change agents. (Action researchers and evaluators are change agents.) It is court jester.

In medieval courts, telling the truth to royalty was dangerous, and often fatal. However, the court jester was an exception. Change agents, like court jesters, can often best do their job by speaking truth to royalty — by telling unpalatable truths to those people who have most to learn from those truths.

(As with court jesters, you must have permission first. It is usually important to be accurate. Sometimes it may not hurt to soften it with a little humour, but only if that doesn't cloud its accuracy. It should also be said that there is some risk; court jesters did occasionally lose their heads.)

For me, this is the most important outcome of effective contracting: that I negotiate for myself a licence to tell the truth. I also try to provide as much encouragement as I can for the clients to tell me the truth.

But this only works to the extent that I have also formed a personal relationship. This has two important aspects:

- Do they accept that I have their interests at heart? Until they do, they will find it very hard to trust me.
- Do they believe that I can look after myself? Until they do, they will find it very hard to tell the truth to me.

I also find it helps to define goals before roles. If I know what outcomes are wanted, I have a better chance of knowing what I can do to help achieve them.

To summarise so far ... The sequence of contracting that I use becomes, in broad terms:

- establish rapport and relationship;
- define roughly the desired outcomes from the overall process of change or evaluation;
- negotiate roles for researcher/evaluator and client.

As usual, these stages are not as clear cut as I have presented them. In practice, they overlap. They are ongoing, especially relationship-building.

Further, as I have said, the power of action research depends largely upon its flexibility and responsiveness. So, above all, I think it is important to develop

relationships in such a way that flexibility is built into them. It is important to negotiate goals and roles that are renegotiable.

I now take up these elements of contracting in turn.

Forming relationships

First, rapport.

Rapport is that state of interaction where you and the other person are "in tune". The initial step in building rapport is to give all your attention to the other person.

There are techniques which can be used to build rapport. My experience has been that they work best when they are highly practised and automatic. It takes time to acquire such a level of skill. Failing this, consciously-controlled non-verbal behaviour can appear stilted and non-genuine. It can have the opposite effect to that intended.

There is a simpler way. Be genuinely interested in what people have to say. Give them *all* your attention. It is then likely that you will automatically do enough of those things that build rapport.

This may also be enough to gain their attention. If not, you may have to control the timing and place of your approach to minimise distractions.

Second, self-disclosure.

It is when people experience you as a *person* that they are most likely to develop empathy with you. Being frank and open about yourself will tend to build better relationships.

However, disclosure which goes well beyond other people's expectations may disturb them. Self-disclosure pitched just beyond their level may encourage them to disclose a little more. When they do, you can take another step into further disclosure.

Setting goals

Sometimes the presenting client will have little idea of what she wants. This simplifies matters. I can offer the client a two-stage process:

1 Some initial diagnosis, perhaps using interviewing. (A later session describes a particular form of interview that I find useful). I can report the results of this, and offer a more detailed proposal for stage 2.

2 I can implement the process identified at stage 1 as most useful. (And in the meantime, the client group and I have had a chance to get to know each other a bit better.)

I prefer to do this in conjunction with a small working party or project group. This makes it easier for me to work towards a participative change program.

On occasion the presenting client will have too clear an idea of what is required. In two respects at least, that can be problematic. I usually have no real way of knowing how appropriate her goals are. Usually, I can't tell if those goals are shared by other stakeholders.

But if I debate the matter, I may just help the client lock herself into her present position.

With such a client, I find it more useful to focus on long-term outcomes and stakeholders. With this as background, I can then discuss ways of getting there.

> "If I do this, and it works well, what would you expect to be the end result, say in 5 years or so?

"If you achieve those end results, who will be affected? Who will be better off? Who will be worse off?

"I can suggest a number of ways of achieving those good results for those people. And perhaps some ways of removing the negative results. Are you interested in talking about those options?"

As a bonus, this approach also demonstrates to the client a communication style which is an alternative to debate.

Negotiating roles

The role of the action researcher is influenced by the relationships formed and the goals identified. Beyond this there are many other important decisions to be made.

They include:

- Who will be involved in the research?
- What level of involvement will they be offered?
- Within what constraints will the research operate? There are likely to be constraints of time and money, for example. And in many settings, there are constraints on access to those who have an interest in the research, and more ...
- Whatever the roles and processes negotiated, how much flexibility exists? Action research can be a very flexible process. It would be a pity to undermine this valuable flexibility by being too firm about the roles and the processes to be used.

To my mind these are issues which do much to determine the later success of the research. The following session in areol is therefore directed to these questions.

For now let me just make just two points about participation. First, in my view there are many levels of participation, and therefore many choices. Second, for me it is important that the clients help to *choose the level* of participation. To me,

this is more important than achieving some particular and predetermined level of participation in the research.

(And, as before, let me say that these are my own views. They work for me. You are as always free to make your own judgments and choices about these matters.)

Renegotiating the relationship

I said above that flexibility and responsiveness are important to me. To a large extent, the flexibility in the research is determined by the flexibility in the relationship between researcher and clients.

At the very least I much prefer to have regular meetings to reconsider the research: its goals, its process, those involved, their level of participation, and so on.

Communication

To negotiate your entry to a client group, and to agree on your role and theirs, requires a certain level of communication skill. Most people have enough for the purpose. Some don't always make good use of it.

(Those who don't have adequate skills can acquire them through appropriate training or experience. My natural communication talents were fairly meagre; if I can learn communication skills, most of you should have little trouble doing so.

(And if you work very participatively, it is possible for you and the client group to help each other in this regard.)

There is an extensive literature on communication, much of it practical. In addition, I've also written some material for the archive. For now, let me focus on a few guidelines which seem to be of help to novice action researchers:

- Establish a high-quality person-to-person relationship with your clients, and most other issues can be resolved with relative ease.
- If in doubt, tell the truth. Tell it about yourself, and about the client. Tell it simply and clearly, without blame or criticism or demand and (more often than not) without apology.

I've often observed a great irony. Novices frequently undermine their credibility by trying to protect it. In attempting to preserve a client's liking they soften what needs to be said ... and end up confusing everyone. In seeking to maintain a client's respect they conceal their ignorance ... and too often the effect is again the opposite of what they intended.

There is a power in relationship-building and in truth-telling which can be used to the benefit of yourself and your clients. This, at least, is my experience.

Archived resources

I've placed an overview of relevant communication skills in the arlist archive. Its title is communicn. It briefly describes ways of stating your own point of view, and ways of getting information from others. It also deals briefly with managing the process of an interaction.

My approach to communication skills builds on some of the models and processes of Chris Argyris. There is a summary of Argyris' core model on the arlist archive. Titled argyris, it is by Liane Anderson (an extract from her thesis).

These can be found as both text and web versions at :

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/communicn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/communicn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/communicn.txt

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/argyris.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/argyris.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/argyris.txt

Other reading

The readings which are suggested here are a small selection from a wide literature. You may have easier access to other books and papers which will serve the purpose as well.

Techniques on rapport building are mostly to be found in the literature on neuro-linguistic programming, also known as NLP. If you decide to peruse this literature, I suggest chapter 2 of:

Laborde, G.Z. (1987) *Influencing with integrity: management skills for communication and negotiation*. Palo Alto, Ca.: Syntony.

Effective contracting depends upon effective communication skills. For an overview which is reasonably consistent with the present approach, you could do worse than:

Narciso, J. and Burkett, D. (1994) *Relating redefined: discovering the new language for communicating*, revised edition. San Antonio, Texas: Redman-Wright Publishing

(The earlier edition is also useful. It was titled *Declare yourself: discovering the me in relationships*, and published by Prentice-Hall.)

If you wish to go deeper than that, it is worth pursuing both expressive and listening skills. You might begin with something on assertion. I prefer one of the classics:

Lange, A. and Jakubowski, P. (1976) *Responsible assertive behaviour: cognitive/behavioural procedures for trainers*. Champaign, Ill. : Research Press.

You can follow it up with something that emphasises the listening aspects of communication, for example any of the effectiveness training books by T. Gordon.

There is some neat material on communication in Viviane Robinson's book about the use of an Argyris and Schon style of action research in two case studies:

Robinson, V. (1993) *Problem-based methodology: research for the improvement of practice*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Conflict can arise suddenly. So it helps if you have some conflict management skills. I recommend either of the following books:

Cornelius, H. and Faire, S. (1989) *Everyone can win: how to resolve conflict*. Brookvale, NSW: Simon and Schuster.

Fisher, R. and Ury, W. (1991) *Getting to yes: negotiating to agreement without giving in*. London: Arrow. [Or any of Roger Fisher's later books on the topic.]

Helena Cornelius and Shoshanna Faire, the authors of the first of these, are associated with the Conflict Resolution Network. Many of CRN's resources are available on the web at http://www.crnhq.org/.

There are two books on a gestalt approach to consultation which I have found very useful. Though their book is not recent, Hermann and Korenich offer very practical advice on developing a healthy relationship. Nevis describes a style of relationship and presentation which can have high impact.

Hermann, S.M. and Korenich, M. (1977) *Authentic management: a gestalt orientation to organizations and their development*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.

Nevis, E.C. (1987) *Organizational consulting: a gestalt approach*. New York: Gardner Press.

Activities

A thought experiment:

Choose some relationship which is ongoing, and in which you and the other person have very different roles.

Recall, in as much detail as you can, a recent situation when you interacted with that person. It is best if it is a situation which often recurs.

Now play it through in your mind but with *reversed* roles. Imagine yourself saying and doing whatever the other person actually said and did. Imagine the other person using your words and actions.

Notice the times when you would be offended or amused or surprised, especially by what the other person said or did in your reverse-role scenario. Analyse the likely reason for the offence or amusement or surprise.

What have you learned about roles and power from this thought experiment? What implications does it have for your role as a researcher or evaluator?

An individual activity

In the Southern Cross action research archive is a workbook exercise which you can use to analyse an interaction in greater depth. If you have some recent experience where you were a researcher or evaluator, and where you were not entirely satisfied with what you did and said, use that as the situation to analyse.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/valwb.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/valwb.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/valwb.txt

Learning group:

Help each other analyse, for your chosen project, the issues which are most important in establishing and maintaining your relationship with your clients.

This session has offered the view that beginnings are important in creating flexible patterns which persist. Good relationships are a crucial part of this. Then there are goals to be identified and roles to be negotiated.

And a final thought ... This doesn't occur only at the beginning of a research or evaluation project. All of it has to be done with *each* client. And then it has to be revisited from time to time during the project.

In the next session, we'll consider the issues of stakeholders and their involvement more closely.

Session 3, and the two sessions following, are about beginnings — the crucial early stages of research or consultancy. This trigger is therefore also about beginnings.

In the classes I coordinate at university, I sometimes invite class members to exchange their first impressions of one another. They don't like doing this. They claim they don't know enough about each other to do it.

So I sometimes say to them:

"I have a friend ... an engineer ... aged about mid 50s ... she ... likes to paint in her spare time ..."

What most of them find is that they begin to form some sort of mental image from the beginning, but then have to discard it and begin anew when I reach "she".

And consider this ...

It seems to me that, as action researchers, almost all of the change we help people bring about is done through our relationship with them. Relationship is crucial.

Also, consider this ...

Sometimes all we know about a person is gender, or occupation, or age, or ethnic background, or ... On this slim evidence we form an impression. This may be before we even meet.

Sometimes a name is enough to give us a mental image. Often a voice is.

Other people are forming impressions of us on such sparse evidence. These other people include action research colleagues and clients and stakeholders.

Do you wonder what first impressions people form of you? How much do you know about this? Are you curious enough to find out more? How might you do that?

And what is the relevance of this to action research, as action and as research?

A case study in contracting ...

I walked into the room to meet the management team of the branch plant. There I found the plant manager and the six people who reported directly to him.

A few days earlier I had been asked to do this by their head office training manager. She had explained that it was to help them with some "team building".

As I walked into the room the hostility was tangible.

On this occasion I had contracted carefully with the training manager who had asked me to do the work. (I'm not always so careful.) I had said that I would do it only if we could agree to certain conditions:

- that the team at the plant decided whether or not the activity went ahead
- that they decided what the nature of the activity would be and
- that they decided how much would be reported back to the training manager.

At the time I had suspected that she wouldn't agree to it. But she just said "Yes, that makes sense".

I explained to the waiting management team at the plant the agreement that I had reached with their training manager. The hostility dropped away. We began to plan how we would work together.

4 stakeholders and participation

... in which I address questions about who to involve in action research programs, and how to involve them. In particular, issues of level of involvement and direct and indirect participation are addressed [10]

You walk into the meeting that you are to facilitate. The hostility is evident. Obviously, they think you are here to do the bidding of the government and the Minister. What on earth can you say and do to overcome the hostility?

In this session:

- categories of stakeholders
- levels of participation
- choosing the appropriate level
- archived resources
- other reading
- activities.

10. Web versions of this file are available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session04.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session04.html

In the preceding session I talked about the importance of contracting with every client. I assume that contracting and relationship-building isn't something done once. It recurs every time a new stakeholder becomes involved. It is renegotiated to some extent each time you meet with any stakeholder.

But which clients? Sometimes it isn't feasible to involve everyone. Choices have to be made. There are those you can't ignore, because you need their support or the information they can provide. There are those you don't wish to ignore, for whatever reason. For many of you, and for me, there are issues of ethics and values to be taken into account as well.

If you decide that there isn't enough time or money, what then? Suppose these constraints require you to be selective. How will you choose?

And what will you involve them in? As informants, probably. Will they also interpret the information they provide? Will they plan and implement the changes? And how much involvement will they have in the process — in designing and facilitating the action research? In deciding what will be researched? In deciding how much they will participate, and in what?

I'm not assuming that there is one right answer to these important questions.

In this session and the accompanying resources, I describe some ways of identifying and involving stakeholders.

Stakeholders

I find "stakeholder" a useful term. I don't know of a simpler word that captures the same meaning. For present purposes, a stakeholder is ...

> someone who has a stake in a program or organisation or whatever
>
> or, in other words, anyone affected by a change, or able to affect it.

That makes it sound as if someone either is a stakeholder, or isn't. Like many concepts, this one can be ambiguous at the boundary. It's often useful to define a number of varieties of stakeholder. I'll come to that in a moment.

As well, there is the term "client".

Some people object to this on the grounds that it implies some sort of power relationship between client and researcher. Perhaps it does.

I would have thought that often the client has some sources of power. She pays the bills, and determines the conditions under which the research is done. The researcher has some power too. She often has expert knowledge of research and evaluation processes which the client doesn't have.

I'll continue to use the term "client". For me, it defines the person for whom I'm doing the research. For me, that usually means *all* of the stakeholders. And for me that includes those who aren't much involved, for whatever reason.

(Not everyone sees it like that. You're free to make up your own mind.)

Here are some varieties of client and stakeholder. I think it's useful to distinguish ...

- The presenting client. This is the person who approaches you, or (sometimes) whom you first approach. The presenting client is your initial contact with the client group.
- The principal client. For some purposes and some researchers there is someone who is given primary allegiance. This is usually the person who pays the bills, or has ultimate power of veto over the research.

  In an organisational setting it may be the chief executive officer.
- Direct stakeholders. These are people who are directly affected by what is happening, or what is going to happen.

For example, suppose you are doing some community consultation for the purpose of traffic design. Direct stakeholders include residents in the area where the roads and transport are to be changed.

- Indirect stakeholders. These are people who have a stake, too. But it may not be as obvious. They may be harder to identify.

In traffic design, indirect stakeholders include the motorists or others who travel through the area where consultation is to take place. Less obviously, so are the residents of other suburbs who will experience increased or reduced traffic if there are changes in this suburb.

It is sometimes difficult to identify all of the indirect stakeholders.

(They may well identify themselves later, when they complain about the decisions made.)

As with most categorisations you can assume that reality is more complex than this. I think, though, that it is a useful simplification. It captures a useful distinction. Often you will have to use different processes to involve direct and indirect stakeholders.

It's useful, too, to remember that you are pursuing both change and understanding. There may be those you wish to involve because you need their support. There may be those who have information which you need. Sometimes you may decide that different forms of involvement are appropriate for each of these.

I'll add a caveat to the categorisation above. It is most useful, I think, if you remember that ultimately stakeholders are *people*.

Which brings me to the next topic: entry and contracting. These early stages involve forming effective relationships. In my experience the most effective relationships are usually those where people relate to each other as people. Person-to-person, not formal-role-to-formal-role.

Participation

Nor is participation all-or-none. There is a continuum which ranges from the barest contact to a situation where the clients do the research for themselves and without assistance.

(Some would say that without high levels of participation you don't have "action research". Again, the differing opinions give you more freedom to make up your own mind.)

It may be useful to identify some points on this continuum. This will indicate the range of choices open to the action researcher.

One way of describing the continuum is by distinguishing non-involvement, representation, and participation.

- In non-involvement, the researcher does it all
- Representation uses a small group of people. They speak on behalf of a larger number
- Participation implies that all stakeholders are involved, or at least are given a chance to be involved

Clearly, though, there are many levels of involvement for those who are representatives or participants. They may be involved only in some shallow information exchange. At the other extreme they may do the research themselves, without outside help.

Here is another way of thinking about it ...

One end of the continuum is defined by non-involvement. The researcher (presumably acting for herself or on someone else's behalf) collects and interprets the information.

As I've said, many would not call this action research. However, it is not unusual for evaluators to conduct their research in this way. Some teacher action

research does little to involve the pupils. Some "emancipatory" research ignores those who are assumed to be powerful.

Then follows consultation. Here I think it is worth distinguishing indirect consultation through representatives, and direct consultation where everyone is consulted.

(Consultation itself is an ambiguous term. Sometimes it is used to refer to the whole spectrum, as in the phrase "community consultation". Sometimes it is intended to describe a situation where people are given information, or asked for opinions, but little more than that.)

Indirect consultation is a common form of involvement for indirect stakeholders. In many change activities, for example, some form of representative group is set up. They are then given information and perhaps asked to react to it. Or perhaps they are asked only for the answers to some questions.

A "reference group", a group of people chosen to speak for some larger body or bodies of people, is an example of indirect consultation. (Obviously, there are many choices about the level of involvement of reference groups.)

In direct consultation all stakeholders are offered the opportunity to give information, or get information, or both. Sometimes they are able to act on that information too.

Research involving many stakeholders can complicate the issues. In such instances it is not uncommon for researchers to distinguish direct and indirect stakeholders. They may then aim for a high level of participation of direct stakeholders, and representation for indirect stakeholders.

"Process consultation" is a label used in the change literature. It describes an approach which offers greater involvement to participants. The researcher or facilitator manages the process by which information is gained. The participants

do the rest. They set the goals, identify and interpret the information, and then develop and implement the plans.

For small numbers of participants, process consultation can achieve very high involvement. At the same time, it makes use of the researcher's expertise in designing and managing the process, or in helping to do so.

Beyond this, clients may be co-researchers. In this approach, both the content of the study and the processes used are chosen by participants and researcher acting together. Except where clients have former experience of action research, it may be hard to achieve this at first unless numbers are very small and researcher and client roles are carefully and sensitively negotiated.

Finally, there may be little or no outside involvement. The client group members may manage their own process and make all their own decisions. In one form they may hire some process expertise from an outside researcher. Or they may do it all themselves.

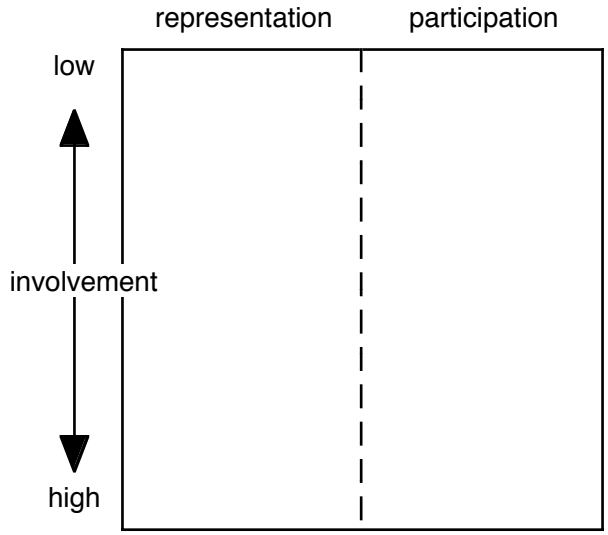
This is common enough when professionals and practitioners use action research to improve their practice. It isn't all that common in other settings, though its use seems to be growing.

So you may think of a continuum of involvement stretching from non-involvement to full client responsibility, with intermediate steps something like this:

- non-involvement
- indirect consultation through representatives
- direct consultation
- process consultation
- co-research
- full client responsibility

These are to some extent arbitrary: I could easily have subdivided the continuum into more or fewer steps.

Alternatively, I could have described it as a matrix in which there are columns for representation and participation, and rows which define varying levels of involvement.



Choosing levels of participation

Most writers on action research encourage high levels of participation. In fact, many researchers use the term "participative action research" or PAR to describe their research paradigm.

A personal view: I value participation highly. (I think my approach to "teaching" and consultancy illustrates this.) I also think it can have high costs. It seems to me that it is important to take both the costs and the benefits into account. There is likely to be an amount of participation which reasonably balances costs and benefits.

I also think it is entirely appropriate for an action researcher to decline a study on the grounds of her values. For example, I have sometimes declined assignments which didn't involve people I thought warranted involvement. Researchers are allowed to have preferences and take them into account.

When I am asked to suggest a level of participation to presenting clients, I prefer instead to engage them in an analysis of the different choices.

In an organisational setting, for example, I may say to them:

> "Clearly you have the authority to decide how participative to be.
>
> "For reasons of urgency, for example, you may decide that high participation is not feasible. If so, however, I don't believe you can later complain about the resistance you encounter. That is inherent in your chosen approach.
>
> "On the other hand, you may choose to use high levels of participation. Don't then complain about the time it may take to reach a decision. That is usually inherent in participative approaches."

As a personal decision, I also decline research and consultancy unless I am allowed to take the interests of all stakeholders into account.

Archived resources

Here are some relevant on line resources and their addresses.

stake. This gives a description of a process for stakeholder analysis. It helps you to decide when you need more information about a stakeholder, and which stakeholders it is most important to involve.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/stake.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/stake.html

partproc. In this file I identify seven different functions in which participants might become involved. I suggest that, for each function, a different decision about who to involve may be made.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/partproc.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/partproc.html

Two files discuss participation in different settings:

comcon. This file, in the form of a checklist, guides the reader through the design of a process for community consultation.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/comcon.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/comcon.html

involv. This file outlines some of the issues in creating involvement in an organisational setting.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/involv.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/involv.html

In addition, Vikki Uhlmann has written a brief and persuasive account of reasons for favouring high participation in action research projects:

partic. A brief listing of the main advantages of participation.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/partic.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/partic.html

Other reading

The literature on participation is scattered. There are mentions in a variety of other literatures. The "grey" literature — monographs and papers put out by a variety of small organisations — is extensive.

Ask around. You'll find a local equivalent for valuable works such as the following. (I recommend all three, by the way. They are all worth chasing.)

Carman, Kathy, and Keith, Ken (1994) *Community consultation techniques: purposes, processes and pitfalls: a guide for planners and facilitators*. Brisbane: Department of Primary Industries.

Emery, Merrilyn, ed. (1989) *Participative design for participative democracy.* Canberra: Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University.

Sarkissian, W. and Perlgut, D., eds. (1994) *The community participation handbook: resources for public involvement in the planning process*, second edition. Murdoch: Institute for Science and Technology Policy, Murdoch University.

There are a number of fields which deal well with participation: quality management, landcare, community risk management, and lots more. A small sample:

Chamala, S., and Mortiss, P.D. (1990) *Working together for landcare: group management skills and strategies*. Brisbane: Australian Academic Press.

Hance, B.J., Chess, Caron, and Sandman, Peter M. (1990) *Industry risk communications manual: improving dialogue with communities*. Florida: Lewis Publishers. (This is a fine little book, with practical checklists.)

Ilsley, Paul J. (1990) *Enhancing the volunteer experience: new insights on strengthening volunteer participation, learning, and commitment*. San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass.

The field of social marketing is relevant:

Kotler, Philip, and Roberto, Eduardo L. (1989) *Social marketing: strategies for changing public behaviour*. New York: Free Press.

So is community organising:

Twelvetrees, Alan (1991) *Community work*, second edition. Basingstoke, Hamps.: Macmillan.

And of course there is work that looks specifically at participative research. Some are mentioned in other sessions. Another good example is:

Park, P., Brydon-Miller, M., Hall, B., and Jackson, T., eds. (1993) *Voices of change: participatory research in the United States and Canada*. Westport: Bergin & Harvey.

The recent literature on action research is mostly highly participative. You'll find a bibliography on the archive:

books. A bibliography of action research books published since 1993. (If you know of important omissions, please send me details.)

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/books.html or
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/books.html

Activities

A thought experiment

You have just heard that "X", a consultant, has been employed by the chief executive officer / the local government council / the program director to survey the views of the people in your organisation / community / program.

What thoughts go through your mind? What suspicions do you harbour in your more sceptical moments? What would "X" have to do and say to overcome your scepticism?

An individual activity

Talk to your colleagues and neighbours about some issue which affects everyone. (Be honest: say you are doing it for an assignment.) Example of issues you can

use are taxes, the environment, transport, and so on. When they offer an opinion, ask them sensitively what information they have on that topic.

What have you learned about the opinions people hold? What are the implications for action research which seeks effective change based on good understanding?

For your learning group

Help each other do a stakeholder analysis for your projects. Then decide who you would have to approach, and how, for effective participation.

(Assume that you have dual goals of action and research.)

———

We've examined a range of stakeholder categories, and a variety of levels of participation. My approach has been to view level of participation as a choice, perhaps different for different stakeholders.

Much of this has all been rather conceptual. The next session turns again to the practical. It examines actual ways of achieving participation.

In action research, I have probably encountered more criticism for my attitudes on participation than on any other topic. I think this means that

(a) I should be clear about my biases, so that you can take them into account, and

(b) it may be even more important than usual that you don't take my view as at all representative of most other action researchers.

My position? First, I have a strong preference for participative methods in almost all that I do. I think I facilitate some of the most participative classes on campus at the universities where I have appointments. And I think I have a reputation for a particularly participative approach to training and consultancy.

(This is a self-perception; I think if you check with people who know me well, they will agree. But one never really knows.)

Second, I do this as a personal preference, not because of some belief that it is the only way.

Done well, participation on balance is the most effective approach where change is intended. People tend to be more strongly committed to those decisions they have helped to make. In addition I have a high need for personal autonomy. I prefer to offer the possibility of the same autonomy to others.

The third has been the source of the criticism. It is that, to my mind, it is useful to retain as many options in the design of research processes as you can. In my view, therefore, the extent of participation is such a choice.

Fourth, issues of participation and its nature are not always clear-cut. There is a wide range of options available.

Fifth, as I think I've made clear elsewhere, I think that "good" research is designed to fit the situation and the intended outcomes. Sometimes, action research isn't the preferred research paradigm.

I have no wish to persuade you to agree. This is intended only to raise some issues for you to think about for yourself.

Consider the choice of level and type of participation in action research. What's *your* preference in your own research? What's *your* position on what is appropriate for other action researchers? What reasons would you offer to support your view?

Is your preference different when you are the researcher, and when you are one of the potential participants?

Building community involvement

A case study

The task was community development in provincial centres. A colleague (Dell Woodcock, and later Eve Robinson) and I did the early planning. We took some care to involve as much of the community in planning and implementing change as we could. There were three stages.

In the first stage, Dell spent some time in a community. She began by contacting the local opinion leaders, and through them the people in their networks. This continued for some weeks. She then invited some well-connected and diverse locals to form a steering committee.

The second stage consisted of the planning and conducting of a one-day strategic planning activity. We helped the steering committee to involve more people in this. We chose a day for the community planning activity and set about building involvement in it:

- steering committee members recruited interested members of the community
- we wrote to every organisation we could identify, inviting them to send as a representative the member who was best able to act for the benefit of the community as a whole

- we advertised in the local newspaper (if there was one) asking people who would like to take part to fill in a brief form and mail it to us; we then sent them an invitation
- we checked if those attending sufficiently represented the community; if not, we recruited others to remedy the gaps.

The planning day used "search", a visioning exercise. Towards the end of the day we identified specific projects which would help to achieve the vision.

Volunteer "liaison persons" were chosen for each of the specific projects. Their task was to recruit local direct stakeholders onto a working party for their project. For coordination, a steering committee member joined each working party, but not as chairperson. Their role was coordination only.

In the third stage the working parties first carried out detailed planning for their project. They then implemented their plans. During this stage the steering committee kept the whole community informed. It also organised resources for working parties when required.

In summary, we sought to broaden involvement as the work proceeded. The working parties were made up of people who had a direct interest in the project, whether they had attended the planning day or not.

By involving a steering committee member on each working party, but not as chair, in effect we set up a communication hierarchy which wasn't a control hierarchy.

5 achieving participation

... in which some ways of achieving involvement of many stakeholders are discussed, and specific processes for high-quality involvement within meetings are described [11]

Imagine some community or organisational issue affecting you. It might be roadworks which will encroach on your home, perhaps. Or a change of structure in your organisation that downgrades you. Now, step back from your situation. Think about all the others who will be affected in some way by whatever decision is made. And ask yourself, if you had the decision to make, how might you take all views into account?

In this session:

- the aims of participation
- interest groups and structure
- an example of a participative structure
- increasing involvement in activities
- archived resources

11. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session05.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session05.html

- other reading
- activities.

Sessions 3 and 4 examined issues of participation and involvement.

In session 3, I talked about the importance of beginnings, especially as they relate to entry and contracting. I expressed a preference for person-to-person relationships with all stakeholders. I said I preferred relationships which were open and flexible. (I don't pretend that such relationships are easily achieved.)

In session 4, I examined the nature of clients and stakeholders. I talked in general terms about how they might be involved. I offered the view that the researcher or evaluator can choose from many levels of involvement.

This session describes some specific ways in which participation can be achieved in practice.

It is probably time for me to repeat something I said earlier. I'm not trying in this program to present all views. The course is built around processes I use. This also means that they are often at their best when they are used to pursue the goals that I pursue.

But it is not my intention that you should regard this as any attempt to present it as "the best way". There are many "best" ways. I think it's a good approach. I would not otherwise use it. But I think it's preferable that you develop your own approach.

When the topic is participation there are many options available and many different views. And some of them are strongly held indeed.

The view offered below focuses on three aspects of participation. It describes one representative structure. It discusses the importance of communication between those directly involved, and other stakeholders. It offers a brief description of an approach for improving the quality of involvement for those directly involved.

The aims of participation

If this on-line course has a theme it can be summarised as "action research is action *and* research". The various aspects and activities of an action research project can each be designed and run to pursue these joint aims of change (or action, or improvement), and understanding (or research, or learning).

These are the aims, too, of participation and involvement.

For me participation has a third aim. In the archived file on community consultation, "comcon" I described it as:

> "• ... the provision of maximum access
> • by mixed face to face groups
> • to real decision-making power
> • using non-adversarial (preferably consensual) processes."

When there are few stakeholders this is easily achieved through direct participation. Involve everyone. Perhaps invite them to be co-researchers.

On other occasions numbers may be large and time may be short. You may then decide that only lower levels of participation are feasible.

Suppose you choose this second option. Your aim (of maximum access) then becomes two-fold:

- to provide as much direct participation as possible to as many as possible ...
- while ensuring that those who are less directly involved are given as many opportunities as possible to give and get information.

And in my view, here's the crunch ... The second of these is difficult, and important, and often ignored or done superficially. Involving indirect participants requires a lot of time, energy, and attention — at least as much as for those who participant directly, and usually more.

I suppose you can use representation as a cheap alternative to direct participation. But if you do, those you don't involve may later make your life difficult. I wouldn't want this to take you by surprise.

In other words, I'm suggesting the following as a desirable option when you choose representation ...

- get the best representative groups that you can
- ensure that all interest groups are involved (or you may have biased data)
- at the same time, create effective two-way communication links between these people and those they "represent".

And, I would add, do what you can to encourage them *not* to act as "representatives". Urge them to speak for themselves, as individuals, while they act on behalf of *all* stakeholders. If they think that they are there only to speak for one interest group the discussions are more likely to become polarised.

Representatives often lock themselves into a position which they can't change without consulting their group. This may or may not be good for the group. But real dialogue becomes almost impossible. Information is distorted to win a point.

Better yet, allow enough time for them to act as intermediaries between all stakeholders and the research team. Their task, then, is not to make decisions. It's to inform the other stakeholders and to engage them in decision-making.

It is only a small step beyond this to engage them as partial or full co-researchers.

Interest groups and structure

A process for planning and developing stakeholder involvement might look something like this:

- Define the interest groups. Sometimes you have the information to do this; mostly you don't. Sometimes there are people in the community or organisation who have it (though often they don't).

  Otherwise, do some preliminary work, for instance through interviewing, to collect the information.

- Decide what level of participation is feasible.

If direct participation for all stakeholders is achievable, then your task is easy. (Well, not really. None of these processes are easy. Some are easier than others.) Find a time when all can convene. Negotiate the processes to be used to plan and implement the project.

As my friend and colleague Alan Davies says, the easiest way to resolve problems or agree on change is to get everyone affected into the same room at the same time.

Often, numbers will be large and time and resources will be short. You may then have to adopt a representative approach. If so, you can add these steps:

- Identify appropriate representatives.
- Work out the smallest number of groups which will give adequate representation and involvement and sufficiently complete information.
- Set up the groups. Offer them some preliminary help in setting initial goals, building relationships, and agreeing on norms of cooperative directness and openness.
- Help them plan how they are going to stay in touch with the groups they are drawn from, and with each other.

And, as I've said previously, I strongly encourage you not to skimp on the last of these.

An example of a structure

Here is an example of a structure which allows reasonably high levels of participation even with large numbers:

- The researcher or evaluator works most directly with a "steering committee". The committee's task is to oversee the project.
- In the early stages of the project the steering committee is directly engaged in diagnostic work. As issues are identified it sets up "working parties" which do the hands-on work. The working parties consist of people who are direct stakeholders in the issue being addressed.

I've used this to good effect in both community and organisational settings. To enhance its effectiveness further, a number of other steps can be taken:

- The steering committee identifies the issues. For each, it sets up a working party consisting of those directly affected. It helps to brief and resource the working parties. It specifies the "givens" or limits; beyond that it has no authority over the working parties.
- For coordination, each working party contains a member of the steering committee. But not as chair. The intention is to create a communication hierarchy without it becoming a power or control hierarchy.

In some settings, I've had success in teaching some facilitation skills to the steering committee members. They then act in a process-only role on the working parties.

Then there are processes which can be used to keep the committees and working parties in touch with the wider group of stakeholders.

- There is a risk that the steering committee will perceive itself as an elite. Even if you avoid this initially it may still become an issue over time.
- To keep it in touch with the community or organisation, a slow turnover of steering committee members can be adopted. Half of its members can be replaced every six months or so. This achieves a balance between change and continuity.
- The steering committee isn't intended as a decision-making body. Its task is to find some way of channelling appropriate information between different stakeholders.

Sometimes, there are too many stakeholders to allow much contact. You can then carry out other activities to improve communication between the steering committee and the wider group of stakeholders.

- Mass media can be used to keep the stakeholders informed. In community settings I like to have the editor of the local newspaper on the steering committee.
- Market research techniques can be used to keep the steering committee informed. Interviewing, phone interviewing and focus groups can work well. Sometimes, written surveys can be efficient and useful. These need not be expensive.

In organisations, there are often existing mass media which can be used. Whether or not there are, it is often worth creating a newsletter for the change program.

In any setting, I encourage the steering committee to notify those directly affected by its plans. I recommend that they report only *achievements* in detail to those less directly affected.

In other words, don't make too much of a song and dance about what you are *going* to do. You otherwise risk raising expectations which won't be satisfied.

I think it is desirable to report plans for change, especially where it is hard to know who should be involved. But it does not have to be in great detail.

In short, you choose those people who together can influence and be influenced by all the stakeholders. You set up some activities to bring these people together face to face. You set up other activities to ensure good two-way communication between these people and the other stakeholders.

Let me add that this is one way only of doing this. In general, I think you'll get the best results by choosing a process and structure in negotiation with the stakeholders. You can take the above description as a starting point if it helps.

Increasing involvement in activities

A lot can be done through thoughtful process design to increase involvement. Suppose, for example, that your primary aim is to collect information from large numbers of people.

A written survey is a common way of doing this. However, response rates to written surveys are notoriously low. You often don't know if the views of those who respond resemble the views of those who don't. It's often a reasonable guess that they do not.

If numbers are not too large you can switch to group surveys using group feedback analysis. Those invited to take part are more likely to do so. The response rate is therefore higher. You can be more assured that the information reflects the views of all or most of the stakeholders.

Group feedback analysis typically uses a pre-compiled questionnaire which participants respond to. After the researcher collates the replies, participants help with interpretation and the planning for improvement.

This can be further enhanced by using a more involving process. Participants can *ask* the questions (or some of the questions) as well as answer them.

Neighbourhood meetings (see *Archived resources* below) tend to attract even more people to take part. By involving the "silent majority" they provide a middle ground, and tend to generate wider commitment. They can yield data giving a more accurate picture of the views of the whole community or organisation.

Group activities

Within most group activities you have a choice of ways in which you can enhance the quality of involvement.

The depth of involvement depends upon *what* you involve the participants in. This is derived in turn from the information you give and get, and the issues addressed by that information.

As discussed in the previous session the involvement may range from a little to a lot. There may be relatively shallow consultation about the issues. Or it may involve participants as co-researchers. Or the participants may do it all.

The processes you use can also influence the extent of involvement. I expect that you can recollect discussions where it was difficult to speak, and speaking didn't guarantee that you were heard. And even when you were heard it didn't give you any influence on decisions. Direct participation isn't necessarily quality participation.

Instead, consider a situation where the following approach is adopted.

- Participants are briefly but clearly notified of:
  - the purpose of the study,
  - the motives of those who initiated it,
  - the identity and motives of the researcher,

  - the use that will be made of the outcomes,
  - the safeguards about anonymity and the like,

  and are then encouraged to renegotiate this if it is not entirely satisfactory.
- The process to be used is briefly described, and again renegotiation is encouraged. (Alternatively, if the participants are sufficiently skilled or there is time enough to take them through a detailed design process, the process is designed in collaboration with them.)
- Most steps in the process cycle through the following stages:
  - the purpose of that step is described, and confusions are clarified;
  - participants are given "thinking time", and encouraged to take notes, before discussion begins;
  - if they wish, participants are then given some time in twos or threes to speak about their ideas in a small group before they are asked to speak in a larger group;
  - processes are used which allow everyone a voice and which encourage listening and understanding.

I would find this a process which offered the possibility of high-quality involvement. I suspect you would too.

Archived resources

There is an overview of a number of methods for high involvement in the file consulpro. After discussing issues of involvement in community settings, it briefly describes a number of specific methods. These include: interviews, written surveys, small group surveys, panels and juries, neighbourhood meetings, search, and delphi, among others.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/consulpro.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/consulpro.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/consulpro.txt

I've already mentioned the file focus on the arlist archive. It is an example of a redesigned focus group. It allows you to involve participants more directly in interpreting the information discussed.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/focus.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/focus.txt

Another group technique (briefly mentioned above as an alternative to written surveys) is group feedback analysis. There is a description of a participative version in the file gfa on the arlist archive.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/gfa.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/gfa.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/gfa.txt

Neighbourhood meetings are described in the file localmeet.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/localmeet.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/localmeet.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/localmeet.txt

Other reading

In general, the literature on organisation development and community development contains descriptions of processes which are participative. Assuring the quality of your data and your interpretations is less well covered — you may want to give attention to these aspects.

There is also relevant material in some material on self-directed work teams, group facilitation, and adult learning. Ask a friendly librarian.

An example from the organisation development literature, written from an action research perspective, is

French, W. and Bell, C.H. (1995) *Organization development: behavioural science interventions for organizational improvement*, fifth edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

For approaches to evaluation which are very similar to that of participative action research, try these:

Patton, M.Q. (1997) *Utilization-focussed evaluation*, third edition. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage.

Activities

A thought experiment:

You are in a group of strangers. List the factors which would make it easier for you to speak openly and directly. List the factors which would inhibit you.

Taking your answers into account, what could a facilitator or researcher do to encourage your participation and openness?

An individual activity:

In session 3, entry and contracting, there was an activity using the workbook in the archived file valwb. Return to this activity.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/valwb.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/valwb.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/valwb

Note the times when your thoughts and feelings were not expressed to the other person(s). What inhibited you? What could be done about it?

When these inhibitions existed, what were the results on: your commitment to any decisions taken? the accuracy of the data available to the group?

For your learning group:

In the resource archives you will find the file "dtuwb". This contains a 9-step process to help a small group discover what makes information undiscussable. Do this activity in your learning group.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/dtuwb.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/dtuwb.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/dtuwb.txt

(If you are in an email learning group, you may have to put together your answer based on experience in a face-to-face group you have experienced.)

In summary ...

Imagine that you are a researcher or evaluator. You are working with a large and varied client group. You wish to involve as many people to as great an extent as you can.

I've suggested that there are many questions to be answered, three in particular. Who do you involve in any smaller group or committee? How do you involve them? How do you ensure communication in both directions between that group and the other stakeholders?

I've also suggested that in each of these, there are issues of both adequacy of data, and commitment to change.

The emphasis of this and the preceding two sessions has been on participation and involvement. The next session is on rigour in data collection and interpretation.

I've been talking about participation and involvement. Mostly I've been talking about recipes. I've barely touched on the bits which to my mind are most important. These are the mindset and communication style of the action researcher.

I remember many years ago helping evaluate an "alternative to prison" program. The prison officers I was working with valued equality. They were hard-working, decent people. They wanted the program to work. They were mostly drawn from those prison officers who found imprisonment demeaning and wanted a better alternative. I enjoyed working with such committed people.

And, listening to them talk to someone on the telephone, I could usually tell if that someone was one of their clients on the program. There was a certain air to the way they talked. I can best describe it as "patronising".

I think that there are two questions which I might reasonably ask myself as I go about what I do (and you may wish to ask yourself)

> The first is ... Am I meeting with these people truly as equals?
> The second is ... Do I convey this in the way I relate to them?

Interestingly, I think that these are independent of the actual level and amount of apparent participation that we achieve. It's possible to achieve high levels of participation, but still fail to achieve equality.

And, as I said earlier, I think meeting as equals, and conveying this in the way we meet, are more important.

As a postscript, it seems to me that it is fiendishly difficult to get good feedback on this. I would dearly love to know what I say and do which interferes with forming equitable person-to-person relationships.

6 rigour in action research

... in which I discuss ways of increasing rigour in action research without sacrificing the flexibility which allows action research to achieve change in field settings [12]

You are no doubt often given information as you talk with someone. How much trust do you place in it? How do you work out what it means? And how much do you trust the meaning you give to it? How would you go about testing the accuracy of the information and the attributed meaning?

In this session:

- a recapitulation
- rigour and flexibility and commitment?
- the cyclic nature of action research
- triangulation: multiple data sources and methods
- creating a climate
- using the literature
- monitoring change

12. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session06.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session06.html

To recap on some of the previous material ...

Action research can be used in a variety of settings, and for several purposes. Its nature is to some extent determined by its primary aim: to allow the simultaneous achievement of change and understanding. As I've said before, action research is action and research.

To achieve change, action research has to be responsive to the situation in which it is used. It has to exhibit flexibility. It has to be able to be used with clients and co-researchers who may not be particularly familiar with it.

Action-oriented research in field settings depends to a large extent on the skill and technique of the people conducting it. In my view, to a large extent it is a performing art. (But then, in my view, so is most good research, at least to some extent. What good scientists do isn't always the same as what the textbooks say they do or they should do.)

Rigour and flexibility and commitment?

It seems to me that these features, responsiveness and flexibility, are essential qualities. They are much of the reason why action research is able to do what it can do. At the same time, they make it hard for you to achieve rigour in conventional ways.

Compared to conventional research, action research must develop its own sources of rigour.

In addition, change occurs most easily and effectively when those who are to carry it out are committed to it. That is best done, I think, through involving them as directly and deeply as the situation allows and they are willing. This, too, does not fit well with rigour as conventionally defined.

In this session I begin to explain how I believe adequate rigour may be achieved. I describe how it can be done without sacrificing the commitment to change, or the responsiveness and flexibility (and participation) on which change depends.

It will be seen that many of its features contribute to both effective change and good research.

The cyclic nature of action research

As I've said before, at the heart of most versions of action research you will find a cycle. There are a number of ways of describing it. The simplest is as an alternation between action and critical reflection.

... action → reflection → action → reflection ...

(For me, critical reflection is one of the important defining features of action research. I use "critical" in the sense of "evaluative", not necessarily as used by the Frankfurt school of philosophy, though that may well be a part of it.)

The action research cycle allows change and understanding to be achieved at the same time. The action produces the change. The critical reflection serves two purposes. It draws understanding from the experience of the action. It then allows the development of plans to turn understanding into action.

Accordingly, reflection has two main parts. Critical review occurs after the action. Planning comes before the next action. You might therefore characterise the action research cycle, simply, as

intend → act → review

It seems to me that most versions can be related to this. In fact this is equivalent to Kurt Lewin's own cycle of

plan → act → evaluate

(You will notice the similarity to some other cycles such as those for experiential learning or continuous improvement.)

The best known description of the cycle here in Australia is that of Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart [13] —

plan → act → observe → reflect

You might think of this as reflection before action, action, reflection during action, and reflection after action.

Some versions of action research depend upon frequent cycles. These offer great flexibility. At each point you need only enough information to take the next step — and that step leads in turn to the step following.

Here is where part of the rigour comes in. Each cycle gives you yet another chance to challenge the data and interpretations of the previous cycles. More cycles, more challenge, and more assurance that the results are valid.

There are some action research processes which appear to use fewer and longer cycles. Soft systems methodology is one. [14] Such processes can and often do contain many small cycles within the larger cycles, and are strengthened by them. Action research can consist of cycles within cycles within cycles, perhaps within cycles.

Within each cycle you can ...

13. For example, Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (1988) *The action research planner*, third edition. Victoria: Deakin University.
14. Soft systems methodology is briefly described in a later session. There is a growing literature. As a starting point, see Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. (1990) *Soft systems methodology in action*. Chichester: Wiley. For a similar and in some respects more elaborated approach see Bob Flood's description of his Total Systems Intervention in Flood, Robert A. (1995) *Solving problem solving: a potent force for effective management*. Chichester: Wiley.

Intend (or: reflect before action)

This allows you to decide what you want the next step to achieve. In addition it allows you to think about what actions might achieve the desired outcomes, and why.

An important part of the "intend" step is to work out how you can most strenuously test the data and the emerging interpretations from previous cycles.

Your plans may include changes to your questions, your methods, the people involved, and perhaps other aspects of the project as well.

Act (and: reflect during action)

This allows you to check that you are doing what you intended. You may find, for example, that you lack the skills to put your plans into action. Or they may not work as well in practice as you expected.

Also, you can monitor whether or not you are achieving your intended outcomes. You can change your action in the light of your experience.

Review (or: reflect after action)

Now you can recollect your actions, and those of other people. You can reflect critically on the assumptions that underpinned your intentions. You can try to make sense of the experience.

It is useful to review:

- the goals you are pursuing
- the data you collected
- your interpretations
- the methodology and methods you are using, and how well they are working

- the people who are involved as participants or informants.

You then move into the second half of the reflection session, by deciding your intentions for the next cycle.

If the constraints allow, all three stages are likely to be more effective if they are done by all the players, acting as co-researchers with you.

Triangulation

There are also other strategies you can use to increase your confidence in your data and interpretations. Most important among them is the use, preferably within each cycle, of multiple sources of information.

There are several ways of doing this, some examined below.

Different methods of data collection

This is commonly called "triangulation" (some people use the term for any technique which uses multiple sources).

For example, you might use both interviews and focus groups, as in the earlier case study (archived as "case1"). Better still, you could choose several very different forms of data collection, such as interviews, analysis of documents, and observation.

Different methods of data interpretation

You might collect interpretations as part of a focus group, and also analyse the transcript of the focus group with the help of suitable software. (Transcribing whole sessions does lead to a lot of time and expense, so you may prefer to find some other means of interpretation.)

You can also use theories to help you make sense of data. Soft systems methodology, for example, uses *systems theory* as a framework for data interpretation. Within the same process, you could use some other theory as well.

Different informants

It is usual in experimental research to try to compile a sample which is randomly chosen from the population being studied. In action research (and some other forms of research) it may often be more useful to put together a sample which is as diverse as possible.

Such a sample is more likely to contain apparently contradictory information. It is often such information which leads you to ask the most useful questions in the next round of data collection.

Multiple case studies

There may be occasions when you can set up action research projects in different situations as two or more independent case studies. (Action research methodologies and case study methodologies go well together.)

Imagine that someone has asked you to help introduce multi-skilling to an organisation. You could find some other organisation also interested in multi-skilling, and study it at the same time.

Equivalent information using different questions

You can ask different questions which pursue the same information of the same informant. For example, asking for dissatisfactions and suggestions for improvement obtains the same information from different perspectives.

A common interviewing technique: after an informant offers her own opinion, ask her what opinions others hold.

Overlapping information through different questions

This is related to the previous point. You can ask an informant related questions which yield overlapping information.

This is an important source of rigour in the Snyder evaluation process, described in later sessions. For example, the participants are asked to define a long-term vision; and then to identify intermediate-term targets or objectives. When they analyse which targets contribute to the vision, there are usually gaps and mismatches. This helps them to re-order their priorities.

Different researchers

One of the advantages of involving participants as co-researchers is that they provide a different perspective which can challenge your own.

You can also involve colleagues as researchers, interpreting information separately and then comparing notes.

For example, in convergent interviewing [15] I recommend that two (or more) interviewers carry out independent interviews. They then meet to compare results. It's sometimes possible to use two pairs. Within each pair, two interviews are compared at a time. Between pairs, the interviews from whole samples can be compared.

Creating a climate

Chris Argyris has spoken compellingly about the ways that threats to valid data arise in many settings. [16] He has offered his own alternative, which creates a climate of open inquiry within the group of people who are researchers and

15. A later session describes convergent interviewing in some depth, as it illustrates the use of conflicting evidence in devising more specific questions ("probes") for later interviews. For more detail see my 1990 monograph *Convergent interviewing*, version 3 (Brisbane: Interchange).
16. Argyris, C. (1980) *Inner contradictions of rigorous research*. New York: Academic Press.

participants. [17] (Some find his work hard to read. His critical analysis, in my opinion, is good enough to repay the effort.)

An earlier session spoke of the importance of beginnings. It mentioned some material on entry and contracting, and suggested some activities to help in building open relationships. You may be able to build an effective participant group in this way.

Your own willingness to be confronting and supportive at the same time will do much to provide a model for other people to follow.

Using the literature

The literature is another valuable source of information. This is especially true of literature which reports relevant experimental or quasi-experimental research findings. Its methods are sufficiently different that, if they yield similar conclusions, you can have more confidence in those findings.

You face some important choices in deciding how to use the literature. On the one hand, extensive prior reading of the literature can help you to avoid re-inventing the wheel. On the other, it's hard to know at the start of a study which literature will be relevant. As well, if you develop your conclusions only from the data, then the literature later provides a more stringent challenge.

You might consider this compromise strategy ... Use the methodological literature to help you choose a robust approach. But then, don't assume you have it right. Review your methodology continuously as you conduct the project, searching out improvements.

17. Argyris, C., Putnam, R. and Smith, D.McL. (1985) *Action science: concepts, methods and skills for research and intervention*, San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass.

Read the literature which is *clearly* relevant to the content of your study. But stay focused. Don't attempt to read as widely as you might for an experimental study.

You will then find that other literature becomes relevant as you continue the research. Much of this literature allows you to assess the extent to which your results also apply to other situations. [18]

Monitoring change

I suggest that you look for chances to move into action as soon as you reasonably can. Don't plan a large change project and only then implement it. Plan the first step, implement it, and then review what you have done. In that way, each change provides a potential test of your plans and their underlying assumptions.

As I describe it here, action research is a pragmatic process. It is intended to *work*: that is, to produce change. If it doesn't, that indicates that your actions or assumptions were not appropriate.

In partial summary, here is a list of the methods suggested above. You can use a variety of ways of increasing the rigour of an action research project:

- use multiple cycles, so that later cycles can test the results of the earlier ones;
- combine data collection and interpretation within each cycle, so that interpretations as well as data can be challenged in later cycles;
- use different methods of data interpretation, or interpret the data against several relevant but different theories or models.

18. Action research values local relevance over generalisability. It is therefore often argued that you can't generalise from action research. I hope this illustrates that that need not always be true. Generalisability from experimental studies of social systems is weak, too, though in a different way. You can generalise from experiments only if there are no extra variables acting on the situation. That rarely applies.

- involve different participants and informants, such as through the use of maximum-diversity samples;
- carry out two or more independent action research studies on similar topics;
- give different questions which pursue equivalent information to the same informant;
- ask questions which yield overlapping information;
- use different researchers, including participants as co-researchers;
- involve a variety of participants, and create a climate in which they are encouraged to challenge your ideas;
- use the literature as a further source of disconfirming evidence;
- monitoring the achievement of planned changes; each change is a test of the assumptions and plans that led to it.

I believe these are important for research, whether mostly action-oriented or mostly research-oriented. They *demand* attention when the study is being done as a thesis, or for publication. [19]

Whatever your reason for pursuing them, they can be summed up quite simply:

- use a cyclic procedure;
- within every cycle vigorously seek out disconfirming evidence in as many ways and from as many sources as practicable.

Assume at all times that your data, your interpretations, your participants, your methods are all inadequate. Seek to improve them.

19. I have archived some documents specifically on the writing of theses and publications. See phd and research on the arlist archive (more details below).

Archived resources

Two files on the arlist archive directly address the topic of rigour in action research. There are also two files specifically on action research for theses and publications. In more detail ...

rigour. Describes, from a practitioner's perspective, why experimental and quasi-experimental methods are often hard to apply in field settings

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour.txt

rigour2. Explains how rigour and economy of effort can both be improved without sacrificing flexibility

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour2.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour2.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour2.txt

rigour3. A paper presented at the Association for Qualitative Research Conference "Issues of rigour in qualitative research" at the Duxton Hotel, Melbourne, Victoria, 6-10 July 1999. It was written primarily for people with little familiarity with action research

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/rigour3.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/rigour3.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/rigour3.txt

phd. A brief account of one approach to action research for thesis purposes; it offers some suggestions for checking that your study is adequate both as a change process and a research process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/phd.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/phd.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/phd.txt

research. Action research for publication and for theses, with particular attention to documentation and writing-up.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/research.html

http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/research.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/research.txt

Other reading

See the material by Argyris, listed in a footnote above. Then try the material below. I'd suggest you start with Kirk and Miller, which is readable and useful. Then perhaps try Smith, though it isn't an easy read. Gareth Morgan's book is a collection of papers; each of them is informative and many are thought-provoking.

Some of the grounded theory literature is relevant here too. It was a pleasant surprise to me when I discovered the grounded theory makes many of the same assumptions I argue for above. (This is especially true of Barney Glaser's writing, less true of Anselm Strauss's.)

Dick, Bob (1999) *Rigour without numbers: the potential of dialectical processes as qualitative research tools*, second edition. Brisbane: Interchange.

Glaser, Barney (1992) *Basics of grounded theory analysis: emergence vs forcing*. Mill Valley, Ca.: Sociology Press.

Kirk, Jerome and Miller, Marc L. (1986) *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage.

Morgan, Gareth, ed. (1983) *Beyond method: strategies for social research*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Smith, John K. (1993) *After the demise of empiricism: the problem of judging social and educational inquiry*. NJ: Ablex Publishing.

Activities

A thought experiment:

A friend has just passed on some information to you, suggesting that there is a spectacular opportunity for investment. Ask yourself ...

- what determines the credibility of the information for you?
- what determines its accuracy?
- are credibility and accuracy positively related, or negatively related, or independent?

An individual activity:

(You may be working on a thesis, or a project for publication. If so, use that as a basis for this activity.)

If you are more of a change agent than a researcher ...

> Take a process for collecting and interpreting information within a change program. Analyse it, and devise ways of improving the rigour of the data collected and the interpretations of it without undermining its effectiveness for change.

If you are more of a researcher than a change agent ...

> Take a typical field research process which emphasises research. Analyse the sources of its rigour. Try to improve its ability to bring about change without undermining its rigour.

If you are a novice in both fields ...

> Find a process which is used for both action and research — for example the structured focus groups described in the archived file focus. Analyse the sources of rigour and change in the process. How can you improve them?
>
> http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html

http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/focus.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/focus.txt

For your learning group:

Help each other analyse your projects. Identify the main sources of flexibility, of commitment, and of rigour. (If you are doing action research for thesis or publication, use that.) Help each other improve the rigour, using the strategies described above, without undermining the responsiveness and flexibility.

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In summary: Action research is a methodology which pursues action and research. The action is helped by flexibility and commitment. It is possible to design action research processes in such a way that flexibility, commitment and rigour enhance each other. This is made easier by using

- a cyclic process in which data and interpretation are integrated;
- multiple sources of data and interpretation within each cycle;
- and at all time a vigorous pursuit of disconfirming evidence.

The few immediately-preceding sessions focused on participation — an "action" aspect of action research. This session took up the issue of rigour, which is a "research" aspect.

Growing numbers of people are using action research for theses, and for publishable research. For them, in particular, the research aspects have to be primary. But rigorous methods are a benefit for all action research.

The next sessions examine some specific methods which have been designed to increase the rigour of data collection and interpretation.

Speaking only for myself ...

From time to time I have been dismayed by the poor reputation which action research has in some quarters. I have often discussed it at length with people who have disparaged it. It has then become apparent that more often than not their knowledge of it is meagre.

So, what is happening here?

I think that there are five main reasons for their reaction.

First, one I have mentioned before. People develop a set of criteria for judging research. These criteria are developed within a particular paradigm, where they may well fit. Applied to research done within other paradigms they may well lead to poor judgments indeed.

To remedy this we can attempt to educate people. I don't think we can otherwise do much about it. Mostly it isn't our practices which are the problem. It's people's assumptions.

Second, researchers tend to judge their own paradigm by its examplars. This is probably fair enough — it is the examplars which define the ideals of the approach. However, other paradigms are often judged by their poorest examples.

I'm not sure we can do much about this. Perhaps the most we can hope for is that we model better behaviour. We can at least judge other paradigms on their merits and not according to our own ideologies.

The remaining causes we *can* address to some extent.

Third, a lot of very pragmatic but uncareful research has been labelled "action research". People come across a piece or two of such research. They decide with some justification that it is poor research. It is then

understandable that they take the next step into assuming that all action research is poor.

So, what do you think we can do to improve our reputation?

Fourth, there is a lot of evangelism out there. I suspect that when action research went underground during the sixties and seventies it fragmented into a lot of sub-varieties. The advocates of each often argue with passion for their own variety. Some of them do this as much with each other as they do with practitioners of other research styles.

How can we deal with this evangelism (our own and our colleagues)?

Fifth, a number of writers have attempted to sidestep the problem. They claim that action research uses a different philosophy. The imperatives of other research therefore need not concern action researchers.

There is enough truth in this for it to appeal to the converted, I think. I suspect it carries little weight with anyone else. Or perhaps that's just me letting my biases influence my perceptions.

The problem is most marked with some of the postmodernists. They adopt a particular form of constructivism which seems to deny that there are *any* grounds on which *any* judgments can be made. They seem to claim either that there is no reality, or that it is completely unknowable.

This appears so patently absurd to some people that all forms of postmodernism are then dismissed. And so are the methodologies which the postmodernists defend. Action research may get tarred with the same brush.

(I think these postmodern theories offer some important challenges to some other ideologies of science. But I also think they sometimes adopt a position so extreme that there is nothing left of theory or practice. So let me venture a personal opinion ...

(I'm persuaded that there are no *certain* grounds on which I can proclaim one version of the "truth" as accurate. In fact, I would hold that many

versions of the truth are merely different maps of the same territory. Multiple maps confer some safety.

(However, I'm unwilling to agree that *no* comparative judgments can be made. Some maps are more plausible — make more contact with my experience of reality — than others. It would take a lot of evidence to persuade me that the world is flat or that the moon is green cheese.)

Do you think there is a reality out there? Do you think it is in any way "knowable"? How would you tell the difference between an accurate map and an inaccurate map, given that reality itself is unapproachable?

Three postscripts ...

It's easy enough to be critical of all but the very best of research. For instance, examine most quasi-experimentation. A truck could be driven through the holes in much of it. The assumptions on which it depends are flagrantly violated. Yet if it is done in a *customary* enough manner, it is excused.

Speaking personally, I hope we don't ever reach the point where we use "custom" as a sufficient defence of action research.

How can we remain at the same time open-minded and critical so that we don't get drawn into ideology?

I said in session 6 that action research is a performing art. That good research is a performing art. I believe I could have said the same thing about living.

But how do you *learn* a performing art?

When I wrote the first version of this trigger I had been re-reading "The reenchantment of science". Well titled. It is a collection of readings, most of which wish to avoid the excesses of scientism while retaining its strengths. A good read — I enjoyed it: Griffin, D.R., ed. (1988) *The reenchantment of*

science: postmodern proposals. Albany: SUNY Press. I think that David Griffin's introduction, in particular, is well argued and useful.

On the virtues of flexibility
A partial case study

This might also be called "In very applied research, wherever you start is the wrong place"

I was helping a group of colleagues conduct a survey followed by a change program in a blue-collar organisation. The method we were to use was survey feedback, an organisation development technique then in vogue.

The survey questions had been fine-tuned through their use in a variety of organisations here and overseas. In those studies the questions had seemed appropriate.

The survey assumed that organisations were structured into identifiable work teams. So did we. We were mistaken. Several hundred of the employees were members of "the blob", with no home team. They were allocated to a team each morning when they reported to work.

It was as well that we talked with a steering committee we had set up in the organisation. We found out about "the blob" before we embarked on the survey.

Some of us were still apprehensive about using a questionnaire developed for other organisations. We volunteered to interview a cross-section of the workforce. They talked from time about "syndicates".

It was fortunate that we did the interviewing. It was fortunate that we questioned the employees about the syndicates that they mentioned. We learned that the members of "the blob" had organised themselves into informal groups of about 20 people.

Each syndicate had an elected (and again informal) leader. Weekly, management posted a list of which shift each worker was allotted to. Syndicate leaders met to negotiate shift swaps for their syndicate members.

The syndicates therefore served several important functions, and three in particular ...

a. They provided an opportunity for people to exercise leadership. This was in an environment where it wasn't accepted to become part of management

b. They provided a home group for members who lacked one in the formal structure

c. They allowed renegotiation of the management-allocated shifts for the week. In doing so they provided a welcome flexibility and some opportunity for workers to choose the shift they worked on. Without this the shift system would probably have led to resistance and perhaps industrial action.

And we almost didn't find out about them. It was fortunate that we were flexible about the study.

session 7: collecting data

... in which three styles of process are described, and delphi is used as a process to illustrate some principles of combined data collection and interpretation [20]

Disagreements *may* lead the way to a deeper understanding. But if people respond to disagreement with defensiveness, it leads instead to a distortion of information. As you read this session, I invite you to consider what needs to be done so that disagreement *does* lead to a pursuit of the truth, not a pursuit of victory

(yes, I realise the concept of "truth" is problematic)

(for that matter, so is the concept of "victory")

In this session:

- styles of process — adversarial, consensual, dialectical
- delphi as a illustration of a dialectical process
- delphi as action research?

20. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session07.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session07.html

This is the first of a number of sessions which examine data collection and interpretation. It follows on from the previous session, which focuses on action research as *research*. To this, it adds some concern for action research as action.

In this session I'll describe some ways in which you can collect and interpret data within an action research cycle. I'll also begin to address what you can do to ensure the quality of your data and the appropriateness of your interpretations.

This session will analyse delphi as a data-collection process. Following sessions will illustrate the approach by describing some specific methods you can use to collect and interpret data.

(Three contextual comments.

(First, I've chosen delphi for this analysis because I think it illustrates some of the key points well. I'm not offering it as the preferred method for data collection and interpretation, though it does serve some purposes very well.

(Second, throughout areol I suggest integrating data collection and interpretation within *each* cycle, including within the small cycles within larger cycles. This may be more a practitioner view than an academic one, though I think it can enhance academic purposes, especially for increasing rigour. As elsewhere, I assume you won't take this as "truth" but will make up your own mind.

(Third, one of the strengths of action research is that it allows you to bring rigour to highly participative processes. While I have not given much attention in this session to issues of participation, you are invited to think about it for yourself. For instance, how could you use delphi in a highly participative way? It can be done effectively.)

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Think back to earlier sessions. You will recall I suggested that within each cycle you seek out multiple data sources. I also suggested combining data collection

and interpretation. Whenever you have two sources of data or interpretation you can use a dialectic process to refine your understanding.

Styles of process

First, some brief definitions:

By *adversarial processes* I mean processes in which it is assumed that one person's gain is another person's loss. Such processes are commonly called *win/lose*.

A debate is an example of an adversarial process. Each debater tries to argue for a point of view. It is usual for one debater to be chosen as the winner.

I treat compromise (as usually practised) as a subset of this: *partial win / partial win*. "I'll let you win this piece if you let me win that piece."

By *consensual processes* I mean processes which first identify agreement, and then build on that agreement. They are *win/win* processes which can give simple and effective decisions if the "wins" are easily enough identified.

Some visioning or ideal-seeking exercises, where people are asked to develop a shared vision, are consensual processes. If the vision is set far enough in the future there is usually quite high agreement, especially if the vision isn't too specific. People are then willing to devote effort to achieving some of that vision.

By *dialectical processes* I mean processes which craft agreement out of disagreement.

Dialectical processes are *win/win* processes. But the wins are achieved only after the disagreements have been identified and resolved. The disagreements often play an important role in identifying misunderstandings.

The goals of dialectical processes are information exchange and understanding. People improve their understanding when they engage vigorously with the

issues. People educate each other. It seems to me that this happens best within a process of cooperative enquiry.

In other words, dialectical processes are processes of mutual education. They are more easily described than achieved. A climate of mutual education is achieved only when people are willing to respect each other, and try to understand each other. Some of the alternative dispute resolution processes for conflict management are dialectic.

Let me add that I don't really believe it is as black and white as these brief definitions suggest. Most processes are at least a bit of everything. The boundaries are fuzzy. But it's a useful set of labels for talking about data collection and interpretation. The type of process you use can effect both change and understanding.

Now, in more detail ...

Adversarial processes

It is difficult for adversarial processes to serve either action or research.

They tend to hinder research. If adversarial processes are used, the aim is to win. People are likely to tell selective truths or perhaps even plausible lies. In the absence of accurate and complete information it is harder to gain a good understanding. It is therefore also harder to make effective decisions.

Adversarial processes may also hinder *action*. The action may be based on biased information. There are losers as well as winners. The losers are not likely to be highly committed to the decisions taken.

(Losers may go along with the decisions, especially in a culture like mine which depends heavily on adversarial processes. In this culture we assume that being allowed to decide binds us to the decision. But as losers we won't exactly be distressed if the plans don't work. Some of us may even throw a spanner into the works when no-one is looking.)

Consensual processes

Consensual processes work best when there is already agreement. This is especially when it is not fully recognised. It is then that its emergence has pleasant surprise value.

These processes can be used to identify and record the unexpected agreement (unexpected by the participants, that is). The agreement can then provide a foundation for further planning or decision-making. When prior but tacit agreement exists, consensual processes may be an efficient way of surfacing it.

A common application is to define some future vision or ideals. The vision then gives people a common purpose. It also serves as a criterion which can help in choosing between detailed options. Especially when previously unrecognised it can act as a catalyst, a spur to collective action.

When consensus works it is an easy and efficient way to generate decisions. If agreement with the decisions is high, so is commitment likely to be. Consensus helps action; it may also help research.

(If consensus is superficial, though, the information and decisions are likely to be superficial too.)

Consensual processes are most effective when there is at least tacit agreement about those issues which are most salient. When there are substantial and salient disagreements, consensual processes are much less effective. This is true whether the disagreements are tacit or explicit.

Under some circumstances consensual processes can be counter-productive. If there are disagreements which are important, people may nevertheless be unwilling to raise them for fear of undermining the consensus, even though it is really a false consensus. This is a particular risk when consensus is highly valued, relationships are close, and conformity is high. [21]

Dialectic processes

Dialectic processes generate agreement from disagreement. They do this by pursuing three goals:

- honest information, directly communicated
- striving to understand what others say
- using disagreement to identify where more information is needed.

In short, dialectic processes combine some of the features of the other two types of process. As with adversarial methods, disagreement is likely to be evident. As with consensual methods, the intention is to reach a mutually agreeable outcome.

At this point, an examination of a conventional mail delphi will illustrate dialectic and its main features. We can then return to a summary of the potential of dialectic for action and research.

Delphi

Delphi is most often used as a forecasting technique. It can be used to create shared judgment and understanding among a panel of experts. [22]

An effective and typical mail delphi might proceed through steps something like these:

1 A researcher decides on a research question which cannot easily be answered because the relevant information is widely scattered.

For example: "When will fully conversational voice recognition be built into most personal computers?"

21. The concept of false consensus was popularised under the title of "groupthink" by Irving Janis. See Janis, I. (1972) *Victims of groupthink: a psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascos*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

(Although voice recognition has improved in recent years, I doubt that it can yet truly be called "conversational". It still requires some "training" to recognise each individual voice. It is likely to mistake many of the little words which glue language together.) [23]

2 The researcher assembles a panel of experts from the fields which are relevant to the research question.

A panel for our illustrative research question would probably include, among others: computer hardware experts, computer software experts, artificial intelligence researchers, linguists, phoneticians, and so on.

3 The panel members are briefed on the purpose of the exercise. They are asked to prepare their answer to the question, and forward it to the researcher.

(Delphi often uses numerical estimates. That makes it easier for the researcher to collate and communicate the results, at least in the earlier rounds.)

4 The researcher collates the results, and mails them out to panel members.

For example, on this first round it would be enough for the researcher to report some measure of the average (probably the median in this instance),

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22. I should explain here that delphi was popular in the 60's, and then fell into disuse in the late 70s. The reason was probably a vigorous critique: Sackman, H. (1975) *Delphi critique: expert opinion, forecasting and group process*. Lexington, Mass.: Heath. There were rebuttals, for example by P. Goldschmidt (1975) 'Scientific inquiry or political critique? Remarks on Delphi critique, expert opinion, forecasting and group process by H. Sackman', *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 7, 195-213. But it was about the time of Sackman's critique that the use of delphi began to decline.
Sackman's criticism was probably justified more by the careless *use* of delphi rather than by delphi itself. It had the unfortunate effect that the technique itself fell into disrepute, in my opinion undeserved. It's pleasing to see that interest in delphi appears to be rekindling.
It's also interesting that Sackman's background was in experimental psychology. He critiqued delphi as if it were survey research, using criteria which were appropriate to that field. He seems not to understand that it is a dialectical process. Had he know that, or understood more about other methodologies, his critique may well have been more even-handed.
23. I have a copy of ViaVoice, an IBM program now available for the Macintosh which I use. I'm pleasantly surprised at how much of my dictation it gets right (I've studied enough psychophonology to have some understanding of the difficulty of the task). I wouldn't yet describe it as fully conversational, or even approximately so.

and some measure of the spread (probably the range or interquartile range). [24]

5 On the second round, the panel members are asked to adjust their estimate towards the average, or provide reasons to support their estimate. Again, they send this material to the researcher

This material is distributed, usually anonymously, to all panel members.

This can continue until agreement is reached. More often, a pre-set number of rounds are held, usually three. It makes more sense to continue until agreement is reached. But it is easier to write a funding proposal for a set number of rounds.

Imagine yourself taking part as a member of such a panel of experts. You've been chosen because you know your own field very well. This field is relevant to the research question. However, it's unlikely that you have a deep familiarity with all of the relevant fields.

Your initial estimate of course is based on the information you have. That is, it will weight highly the evidence you know best. Other panel members have different expertise. It's natural, then, that they will reach different estimates.

For example, if you are a computer person who knows little of linguistics, you will probably give an optimistic estimate. Hardware and software are developing very rapidly. Computers today can manage easily tasks that would have been beyond much larger computers only a decade ago. With some training for the software to recognise your voice, current software already does quite well.

24. It isn't necessary to have a good understanding of what a median or a range is. The important point is that you want to give panel members some idea of the average estimate, and some idea of how much spread there is. (For the curious: median and range — or, better, interquartile range — are chosen instead of mean and standard deviation for good reason. The distribution of responses is likely to be skewed — bunched towards one end — rather than symmetrical. Under these circumstances median and interquartile range are likely to give people a better understanding of the central tendency and the spread.)

If you are a linguist you know how problematic speech recognition is. For instance, you understand that the differences from person to person are greater than non-experts recognise. You know the extent to which people take context into account in deciphering speech. This is something people do far better than computers. So your estimate is more pessimistic.

When you discover that many of the panel members have come up with very different estimates, you may be motivated to:

- present the evidence you have which supports your estimate; and
- find out why other panel members gave such different estimates.

The result is that you educate the other panelists. You identify, from your field of expertise, the most relevant information. This is sent to them. In other words, you provide selective information. As it is the information which supports your position, it may well be information which others do not know.

At the same time, you receive from them a lot of information. Some of it is most probably new for you. They educate you.

The usual outcome is that the estimates converge over time. They move towards agreement from round to round. In this way delphi has provided mutual education. As more information is shared, the panelists move towards agreement. [25]

Now think of this in terms of data and interpretation. Delphi begins by asking panelists to provide interpretations rather than data. It then uses differences in these interpretations to identify relevant data. After the exchange of data, the interpretations are revised.

Over time, the data tend to become more specific. The interpretations tend to become more inclusive of all the information. Neat!

25. On occasions, panel estimates converge towards two points rather than one. My guess is that when this occurs, the estimates are influenced by both information and values. The value differences, I expect, explain the lack of agreement.

Delphi as action research

Done by mail, delphi is a process very different to normal conversation or debate. The panelists don't meet. Usually they are not even identified. And often they have little say in determining the research question. However, none of these are necessary features.

As research, delphi offers many advantages. If the panel members are well chosen their later decisions are based on much better information than their early decisions.

I would also expect that if the panelists were interested in taking action on their decisions they would be well motivated to do so.

A word, too, about relationships. Delphi is mostly done by mail, and often anonymously. The task of managing the interactions is thus much easier. If you run delphi in some other way, such as face-to-face, you need a more carefully-managed process and substantially better facilitation skills.

This was intended primarily as an example. Notice, though, the issues faced by the researcher ... How are the panelists to be chosen? What question will they be asked? How will the information be collated and distributed? These are questions of relevance to the action researcher.

Notice, too: the cyclic nature; the convergence towards agreement; the interaction of data and interpretation; the use of disagreement to lead participants deeper into data and interpretations.

Archived resources

A brief description of adversarial, consensual and dialectical processes can be found in the archived file dialectic.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/dialectic.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/dialectic.html

ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/dialectic.txt

A description of a face-to-face version of delphi is available, named delphi.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/delphi.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/delphi.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/delphi.txt

Other archived resources will be listed in the following sessions which describe specific methods.

Other reading

To provide some background into the issues of applied qualitative research, there is an interesting collection of papers contributed by some well know researchers in:

Lawler, E.E., Mohrman, A.M., Mohrman, S.A., Ledford, G.E., and Cummings, T.G., eds. (1985) *Doing research that is useful for theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

In cycling between data and interpretation, the methods of grounded theory are quite similar to what I've described. Grounded theory is theory grounded in experience. The theory is developed to make sense of the data.

A useful description of the best known form of grounded theory is given in:

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of qualitative research: grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage.

It should be said that Barney Glaser doesn't regard this as proper grounded theory. For his strongly-argued view see:

Glaser, B. (1992) *Basics of grounded theory analysis: emergence vs forcing*. Mill Valley, Ca.: Sociology Press.

My own view is that Glaser's approach is more like action research than Strauss's. I agree with most of Glaser's critique of Strauss and Corbin. If you want to access the earlier literature ...

Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1967) *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.

As an example of applications of grounded theory to management try:

Locke, Karen (2001) *Grounded theory in management research*. London: Sage.

For a simple but detailed description of a standard version of delphi, read

Delbecq, A.L., Van de Ven, A.H. and Gustafson, D.H. (1986) *Group techniques for program planning*. Middleton, Wis.: Greenbriar.

This also describes nominal group technique, another data collection process.

For more detailed descriptions and analyses, check out some of the papers in

Adler, M. and Ziglio, E., eds. (1996) *Gazing into the oracle: the delphi method and its application to social policy and public health*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Activities

A thought experiment:

Think back to some recent times when you heard or read something that you disagreed with. Make a list of a number of these, if you can. (Or, if you can't, begin to assemble a list over the next week.)

Which of these responses is most common for you:

"That's wrong!"

"Hmm, that's an interesting position. Perhaps it's correct."

"I believe differently. How can I explain how this person and I came to such different conclusions, and find out what the reality is?"

In other words, note your own use of adversarial, consensual and dialectical processes when you encounter disagreement.

An individual activity:

Before you read the archived file on delphi, design your own face-to-face (or email) delphi process.

- Take the description of a mail delphi, above, as your starting point
- Choose a research question that is relevant to your action research interests, and which has both action and research components
- Work out a process for running a delphi-like process face to face.

You will probably want to give attention to: choosing panelists; briefing them; deciding how to collect and collate the information; your own communication style; and so on.

When you've designed a process, check how well it is likely to function as action research. How well does it generate accurate information? How likely is it to lead to committed action?

For your learning group:

Do the individual activity, above, as a group activity. Choose a suitable example from one of your learning group members. Help that person design a process and critique it. Then help each other decide how you can make use, in your own action research, of what you have learned.

Part way through the activity, pause to critique your own interaction. How well are you achieving the goals suggested above: honest information, directly communicated; striving to understand what others say; using disagreement to identify where more information is needed?

In other words, how successful are you in creating a climate of mutual enquiry for mutual education?

———

Using a description of delphi as a vehicle, this session has explored a number of styles of process for information collection. In particular, dialectic processes which assist both action and research have been addressed.

The next session explores, in some detail, an interview technique which uses a form of dialectic process.

Below are thoughts that I find hard to translate simply into speech. But in any event, my intention is to energise the mind, not persuade you to a point of view.

Speaking only for myself ...

The individual exercise in this week's session contains the following sentences:

> "That's wrong!"
>
> "Hmm, that's an interesting position. Perhaps it's correct."
>
> "I believe differently. How can I explain how this person and I came to such different conclusions, and find out what the reality is?"

Behind each of these is a particular *mindset* which energises the thought.

These are what you might say to yourself. You can use a similar categorisation for what you and others say out loud in response to some assertion.

An adversarial statement might be an open expression of disagreement. "No, the facts are ...". Or it may be disguised as half-agreement. "Yes, but ..."

The underlying mindset might be characterised as win/lose. "There is going to be a winner and a loser to this discussion. If I'm not the winner, I'll be the loser." Chris Argyris has written about this as "Model I". It may be summarised as a set of personal guidelines:

- Win, don't lose
- Unilaterally control the process and outcomes
- Avoid emotionality. Value rationality.

A consensual statement may focus on something you can agree with. "I agree that ..." Or it may just agree uncritically. "Yes, absolutely."

The underlying mindset may be that conflict is bad, and to be avoided. It, too, has some qualities of Argyris' model 1. The stance is win/win. There may be an underlying assumption that "if I don't agree it will turn into win/lose".

At its worst, this is what Irving Janis described as "groupthink". According to Janis, cohesive teams are especially in danger of this. [26]

A dialectical statement is likely to be a little more complex. For example: "The evidence I'm familiar with suggests ... It seems you have different evidence. Can you say a bit more?" And of course the tone of voice and body language are important.

26. Janis, Irving (1972) *Victims of groupthink: a psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

The underlying mindset is a belief that it's a complex world which different people perceive differently. There is often more than one right answer, and sometimes there aren't any right answers. Diversity is valuable.

(You may have noticed that as something of a theme on areol.)

The general semantics motto "the map is not the territory" belongs here. So does Argyris' Model 2, [27] which can be summarised as:

- Free and informed choice
- Mutual control of processes and outcomes
- Continuous testing of assumptions.

It seems to me that it's the dialectical mindset which is most consistent with action research as action and research. And it seems to me that it may be easy enough to learn an action research *process*. Bringing to it appropriate behaviours and mindsets may be a little more difficult.

It's helpful, too, to be able to recognise and respond appropriately to the mindset of the other person. I suspect that the first step is to be able to recognise one's own mindset.

This may not be easy. For me, these mindsets are well-practised and therefore deeply embedded in the unconscious. It has required deliberate effort and conscious strategies to uncover them.

And there are still people and situations which trigger my adversarial or my "agree at all costs" mindset. I presume that's true for others too.

What do you think?

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27. Written about in a number of places. Of interest to facilitators is Argyris, Chris (1985) *Strategy, change and defensive routines*. Boston: Pitman.

8 convergent interviewing

... in which an action research interviewing technique for preliminary data collection is described, and used to illustrate some principles of data collection [28]

Talking informally to people can be an effective method for data collection. The interviewing method described in some detail below resembles informal conversation in some respects. As you read it, you may be interested in looking for ways to use some of the processes in your normal conversation

In this session:

- a description of convergent interviewing
- conducting a series of convergent interviews
- convergent interviewing and involvement
- convergent interviewing as action research
- applications.

28. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session08.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session08.html

The topic of this and the adjoining sessions is data collection for action and research. This session describes one particular approach to data collection, known as convergent interviewing.

I begin with an overview of the technique. This is followed up by a more detailed description, first of an individual interview, then of a series of interviews. Finally I offer some suggestions for applications, and further reading.

I have a number of reasons for describing convergent interviewing at this stage in the program. It illustrates many of the principles discussed in the previous session. It was designed as an action research technique. It is systematic enough that it can be described easily, but flexible enough that it can be used in messy situations.

If I used only one formal data collection method (though that is quite often inadvisable) I think this might be it. At first glance it's less participative than I might wish. But this can be remedied or at least alleviated.

In brief ...

To start each interview you ask a very open ended question, and then keep your informant talking. The content of a convergent interview therefore comes almost entirely from the informant.

Each interview starts this way. All informants are given the chance at first to contribute their perceptions unshaped by more detailed questions.

In most interviews, but especially the later ones, you add more specific questions. This occurs towards the end of the interview. The specific questions become more precise from interview to interview.

The process is structured. There are some definable stages to each interview. You interpret the information as you proceed — you don't save it up for analysis

at the end of the program. The series of interviews is structured in such a way that information is interpreted from interview to interview.

In analysing the data, you identify disagreements: when different people offer different views of some issue. You use disagreements to guide the development of probe questions which take you deeper into explanation.

The result is a reasonably efficient form of data collection and interpretation. It allows the quality of data and interpretation to be checked. The process is driven by the informants and the data they provide. If your questions are determined by comments in previous interviews you are protected to some extent from imposing your own biases on the data.

If sampling is reasonably good you can obtain a good understanding from surprisingly few people.

All of this will become clearer as we go into more detail.

The interview

There are five main stages:

1 Make the informant comfortable

Make the informant comfortable and introduce yourself. Give brief details of:

- who you are
- what you are doing
- who gets given any information
- what the purpose of the interview is

and any other information which your informants are likely to want to know about the study. Use this stage to build initial rapport.

Your informants will probably want to know who will get the information, and in what form. My preference is to collate information in such a way that I preserve the anonymity of informants. I also prefer to make the same information available to everyone.

> "I'll report the results of the interviews only in summary. I'll do it in such a way that you can't be identified as the source of any information. Any information which I give to *anyone* is also available to you."

I think it's important to be clear about your motives, who is paying you, who gets your allegiance, and what is likely to happen as a consequence of the interviews.

If the informants have to guess at this, their paranoia may blossom. People may assume that unstated motives are deliberately hidden motives, and they may suspect the worst.

> "I've been asked to do this interviewing by the chief executive of the organisation.
>
> "I've agreed to do so only if certain conditions apply. One is that I will act for everyone's benefit, not just the chief executive's. Another is that we've set up a working party to guide the research, and on which all levels of the organisation are represented. Another is that any information which goes to the chief executive also goes to everyone who asks for it."

2. Ask the opening question

The opening question defines the general area without being more specific. Think of it as a question which is almost free of content.

> "I'm interested in learning how this organisation works. I'd like to know what's good about it, and what can be improved. So, what do you like, and what do you dislike, about working for this organisation?"

Or, more simply: "Tell me about this organisation." Or "this program" or "this community" or whatever.

3. Keep the informant talking

This is the key part. Your goal is for the informant to talk, without being asked specific questions, for about 45 minutes to an hour.

Nod, smile, say "Mmhmm". Pause and look expectant. Repeat their last word or phrase with a questioning intonation: "Trust?". Say "Tell me more". "You mentioned ..." Use all of the techniques that the counselling literature calls "minimal encouragers".

Be curious about the informant's experience. Give her *100 per cent* of your attention. This requires effort. But if you do this, you probably don't need to use any specific rapport-building techniques. Your task is to understand what it is like to be this person in this situation. Most informants find this an affirming experience.

(A note for more experienced interviewers ... You can, with some risk of bias, improve the depth of rapport and the quality of information by the use of careful self-disclosure. This has the effect of making it a little more like a conversation.

(However, it is difficult to do well. It lowers the efficiency of the interview if overdone. After all, it is the *informant's* views which are being sought, not yours. And unless you are scrupulously careful you may shape the informant's responses.)

When their early suspicion and reticence have lowered, many informants talk very freely. I have often been given information which would have placed the informant at risk if I had reported it in a way that allowed them to be identified.

Memorise the themes as they arise. Or (after getting permission) take "key word" notes. I suggest you learn ways of doing this without losing eye contact. Detailed note-taking interferes with rapport.

In case you were wondering, I think tape recorders are fine. They interfere with rapport initially, but usually not for long. But you have to listen to each interview twice, once in reality and once on tape. I'd rather use the time to conduct another interview. To my mind, that's usually a more efficient use of time.

Your views may differ. Why not experiment then make up your own mind. If you do use a tape recorder I suggest you place it within reach of your informant. Let her know how to turn it off any time she wishes to do that.

> "This is the pause button. Please use it any time you wish something not to be recorded. Please use it any time you want me to erase something you've just said."

4. Ask the probe questions

Towards the end, ask the probe questions developed from earlier interviews. You won't have to ask them all, as some will have already been answered during the interview. There may not be any probe questions in the first pair of interviews.

If you have any probes about the actual *conduct* of the interview and the research, ask them now. It's useful to have such probes to refine your process. They may be about such matters as the project as a whole, the interview, the sample, and so on.

I often make a practice of asking who else I ought to talk to, "... especially people whose views are different to yours". This serves to check my sampling.

5. Conclude the interview

Ask the informants for a summary of the key points they have mentioned. Compare this to your own mental summary or notes. Thank the informant profusely. Very briefly repeat the key points about what will happen to the information, and how the person can access it.

Write up the results of the interview while it is still fresh in your mind. Bullet-points are adequate — this doesn't have to be a polished report.

That's an individual interview. The work done between interviews is also an important part of the process.

The interview series

For best effect, interviewers work in pairs. You interview one informant each and then each prepare a brief summary of the interview themes. Immediately after, you meet to compare results and develop probe questions.

(Working alone, you can apply the same logic to pairs of interviews. Not quite as good, but more than adequate.)

After each interview you also review your methods. Is the opening question working as intended? How appropriate does the overall interview format appear to be? Does the sample appear to include all of the various points of view?

Sampling

Choosing a good sample is important. For reasons I've mentioned elsewhere in this program I prefer a maximum diversity sample. I like to have all interests, including minority interests, represented. I often add to the sample as I develop a better understanding of the diversity of people within the organisation or community.

If I can arrange it I also like to interview very different people in the early stages. This generates more disagreement between the interviews. Where agreement arises it usually turns out to be widespread. Because it's an early interview you have lots of opportunities to find exceptions.

(There is also relevant material in the areol sessions on participation, and in the associated resource files.)

Probe questions

A key element in the process is the development of probes. You and your colleague compare your summaries, looking for themes mentioned by both informants (or by one informant and an earlier informant). If you are doing the interviewing on your own, compare adjacent interviews.

Suppose the two informants agree. For instance, both may say "We plan poorly."

When this happens, devise a probe question or questions to find exceptions. "What's *good* about the planning you do?" Or "Who is best at planning?" Or "When do you plan well?" Or probably all of these.

Sometimes your informants will disagree. One may say "We're terrible at planning". The other may say "One of our strengths is planning". Both have mentioned the theme of planning, but they have different perceptions of it.

Develop a probe to explain the disagreement. "Some have said planning is done well; some have disagreed. What do you think? Help me to understand why there are differences of opinion about this."

Involvement

On the face of it, this isn't a very participative approach to data collection. However, consider this:

- The information is coming from the informants, not being determined by the questions you ask.
- Through your probe questions, you are also involving the informants in interpretation. They are helping you to develop a better understanding of the situation.

And you can take it further than that ...

- You can use members of the client organisation or community as interviewers. (Primary school children have interviewed their peers for me, on occasion.)
- You can report the results back to a group from the client organisation or community. They can then determine the significance of what you have found.

It isn't as participative as some methods. That is often a disadvantage. But even here there is a lot you can do to increase involvement. Also, you can use it initially to generate some information for reporting to participants. They can then use this information to devise a more effective process.

Convergent interviewing as action research

Consider, now, some of the features of the method that you've just read about. In particular, notice its cyclic nature and its use of dialectic.

Each pair of interviews, including the review session immediately following them, constitutes an action research cycle. The review sessions interpret the data emerging from the interviews. During the review sessions you also plan the questions which will give you a better understanding of the situation.

At the same time, the questions used, the process and the sampling are checked. They can then be modified at the next round.

As with the earlier evaluation case study `case1` the interview series may also form a larger cycle. The interview results may be compared to those from other data collection methods.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case1.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case1.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case1.txt

The probe questions contribute much to the efficiency of the technique. You don't need to carry forward copious amounts of data: you record the interpretations.

You will recall that there were two types of overlap in the themes, and two corresponding types of probe.

Agreements	which were tested by seeking exceptions
Disagreements	for which explanations were sought

In other words, in later interviews you *challenge* the interpretations arising from early interviews. You also ask more specific questions, pursuing deeper understanding as you follow up the explanations and disagreements. By seeking exceptions you allow disconfirmation of your data and interpretations. The disagreements, and the explanations you seek, are important. They guide you deeper into the pool of potentially-available data.

Notice, too, how the process is driven by the informants and the data they provide. Although the probes become more specific, each interview begins with a very open-ended question. Each informant is give a chance to contribute data uncontaminated by your interpretations so far.

Applications

In the early stages of contracting for an action research project, a potential client will often expect a detailed proposal. My preference is to negotiate something

much more flexible. I seldom know from initial contact what process will be appropriate.

In this situation I may offer to do some convergent interviewing (for a fixed price, it this is a paid engagement). After the interviewing, I can present a report, and a more detailed proposal of how the project might proceed from there. I have found that relatively small samples, carefully chosen, usually allow a surprisingly good diagnosis.

Sometimes, low-impact data collection is needed. For example, it may be a large community or organisation, and time may be short. Some quick data collection may be useful; and convergent interviewing is one possible method for collecting the data.

Again, for large organisations and communities, you may be working more directly with a smaller working party. Convergent interviewing is easily learned. The working party can use it for initial data gathering. (They will also need some effective way of reporting back to the other stakeholders.)

On some occasions, you will find that your client group members have already done some data collection. If so, it's likely that they used some form of written survey. Unless they designed it well, it may not have given them the information they wanted. Often the information is hard to interpret. A relatively small number of convergent interviews may help you clarify and interpret the survey data.

Archived resources

There is a document titled iview on the archive which gives more detail and a step-by-step description of convergent interviewing. You will find it at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/iview.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/iview.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/iview.txt

Both interpretation and process are driven by the information collected. A document datadriv on the archive explains this in a little more detail.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/datadriv.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/datadriv.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/datadriv.txt

Other reading

The archived file mentioned immediately above was developed from the following monograph:

Dick, B. (1990) *Convergent interviewing*, version 3. Brisbane: Interchange.

(It's currently out of print, currently part way through a revision.)

For a thorough discussion of a somewhat different style of research interview, I suggest

Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E., and Alexander, L. (1990) *In-depth interviewing: researching people*. Melbourne, Vic.: Longman Cheshire.

It discusses the context of interviewing, examines the principles, relates interviewing to research generally, and provides lots of practical hints.

You'll get a good overview of the theory and practice of research interviewing from

Kvale, Steinar (1996) *InterViews: an introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Other useful books:

Seidman, Irving (1998) *Interviewing as qualitative research: a guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*, second edition. New York: Teachers College Press.

Brenner, Michael, Brown, Jennifer, and Canter, David, eds. (1985) *The research interview: uses and approaches*. London: Academic Press.

Holstein, James A., and Gubrium, Jaber F. (1995) *The active interview.* Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage.

McCracken, Grant (1988) *The long interview.* Newbury Park: Sage.

Weiss, Robert Stuart (1994) *Learning from strangers : the art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Free Press.

Activities

A thought experiment:

Interview yourself. (If you do it aloud, I suggest you give some attention to privacy and sound-proofing.) Practise devising probe questions on the run. You can do this by asking yourself for exceptions, and then asking for explanations of the exceptions.

If you interview yourself in this way about your action learning project, how similar is this to a critical review?

An individual activity:

Several features of convergent interviewing respond well to practice, these four in particular:

- building rapport through giving the informant all of your attention;
- keeping the informant talking by using a variety of natural "minimal encouragers";
- taking key word notes without losing eye contact; (if you mark the next vacant line on your note pad with your non-writing hand, you can take notes there while maintaining eye contact. You can move your non-writing hand during natural pauses in the conversation.)

- devising probe questions.

Involving a partner in the process will help to reinforce it for you, too. Otherwise do two interviews. Afterwards, compare the two interviews and develop probe questions.

Finally, debrief your experience. Give attention to the four aspects of convergent interviewing you have been practising. Use an action research approach in the debriefing. This is more effective if you include your informants in your debriefing.

Then, for best effect, do another two interviews.

For your learning group

Help each other identify ways in which you can use convergent interviewing in your action research projects.

You may be able to organise to help each other with the interviewing, so that you can work in pairs.

We've been examining convergent interviewing as a low-involvement action research method for collecting data and developing explanations of it.

One key feature of it is the treatment of information. Agreements and disagreements are used to devise probe questions. Probe questions seek to test agreements by finding exceptions, and resolve disagreements by seeking explanations.

The next session examines a group method for data collection and interpretation.

One of the suggestions I tentatively offer in session 8 is not to use tape recorders. I say there that I can do two interviews in less than the time that it would take me to do one, and listen to the tape of it. That seems to me to be better use of time.

I also find I pay more attention if I don't tape it. Necessity provides the motivation.

Other people no doubt have other views. And that's fine. (As I've said before, if I am open about my own assumptions and label them as such, you are free to make up your own mind.)

When I'm supervising theses and dissertations, I suggest to people that they do tape record each interview. Why? Because examiners expect it. It's easier to do so than to fight the examiners. Not as effective for either action or research, in my view. More persuasive to others.

Raises some issues, doesn't it. Who do we do thesis research for? Who do we do other research for?

and another one ...

In session 8 I also mention in passing that under some circumstances the quality of rapport can be enhanced by self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer. It makes it seem more like a conversation. It helps to set a constructive tone. You are more likely to appear as a real person.

Obviously, you can also contaminate the data by shaping the responses of the person you're talking to.

Like most (all?) techniques it has advantages and disadvantages. It's a matter of strengthening the advantages and doing what you can to overcome or weaken the disadvantages.

But how do you come to understand your own biases, so that you can allow for them?

9 focus groups

... in which two forms of focus group are described, one of them as focus groups are often conducted, the other a variation designed to increase both rigour and involvement [29]

Take a moment to consider this before proceeding ... Most of us spend a fair amount of our time in unstructured discussion. How effective is it, do you think, as a way of exchanging information? Are there occasions when you could improve it by introducing some structure into it? What types of structures do you think might be successful for what purposes?

In this session:

- a description of a typical focus group
- an alternative approach to focus groups
- some issues about data collection in a group setting

29. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session09.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session09.html

Last session we talked about a particular interviewing technique: convergent interviewing. This session examines a more involving activity which collects information in a group setting: the focus group.

A focus group is a "focussed group interview". Compared to individual interviews, it more easily provides opportunities for participant involvement and interaction. [30]

I begin by describing, briefly, a typical focus group. I then discuss an alternative version. It is used to illustrate some general principles about process management and data interpretation.

Focus groups

As I said, focus groups are group interviews. The researcher frames and asks the questions. The informants respond to that question and to each others' responses.

Focus groups are commonly used for marketing research. They appear to be spreading to other fields of qualitative research, and to be more common than they were even a few years ago. (Or at least re-spreading; qualitative research was their original application, I believe.) There is a growing literature specifically on focus groups.

As often conducted, the group consists of 8 to 12 people, or perhaps a few more or less. The participants (the "panel") may be chosen to be fairly similar, being drawn from a particular category of informant. One to two hours is a typical duration.

30. Focus groups are also briefly discussed in one of the archived case studies. See case study 1 in the archive: http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/case1.html or http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/case1.html or ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/case1.txt

Food to nibble, and drinks, are often provided. Participants are often paid or offered a gift of some sort for taking part. The venue is comfortable. The participants are treated well.

(The inducements are intended to attract informants into taking part. In work settings material rewards may be less necessary. It is often enough to conduct the focus group in working time.)

A skilled facilitator asks the questions. Questions are usually framed to relate to one concept — a planned new product; a particular community issue; a problem ... The information collected is usually about the informants' attitude to that concept or idea or product. The facilitator then keeps the conversation flowing. As you can imagine, the quality of information depends a lot on the facilitator's skills.

The entire group session is most often recorded. Video is common. Audio can be used instead. Whether video or audio, the transcript or tape of the session can be analysed in depth.

My intention in the rest of this session is to apply some of the ideas from earlier sessions. Focus groups will be used as a vehicle for doing this.

If you do not know much about focus groups, this session will introduce you to a form of focus group which is designed as an action research method. Along the way, we'll also summarise or expand on some earlier material.

Before you read on, you may wish to consider how *you* would structure focus groups to improve the quality of both involvement and data. You might start by considering these questions: How could you involve informants more (for example in interpreting the information)? How could you improve the data (for example by building in dialectical processes)?

The description which follows is one way of conducting a focus group as part of an action research project.

Here in overview is a possible structure you might use:

1 Preparation: choose the panel members and approach them; plan the process; select the venue.

2 Set the scene: welcome people; explain the purpose and process; invite people to introduce themselves.

3 Context: facilitate a brief initial discussion which is slightly broader than the issue or concept that interests you. For example, if the topic is a particular form of training within an organisation, begin by discussing training in general.

   This gives you a chance to warm people up to the important discussion to follow. It also provides you with an opportunity to learn how the group interacts and plan your facilitation accordingly.

4 The discussion. This is the heart of the process, and can contain a number of steps:

   - explain the concept, and what you want from the discussion
   - allow people a few minutes to think about their response to the concept or issue
   - an initial open discussion follows; during this, encourage people to identify themes and note them down for the next part of the discussion
   - ask people to report what themes they identified; capture these on butcher paper or electronic whiteboard (electronic whiteboards are great for this purpose)
   - then facilitate a discussion on the relative importance and meaning of the themes; capture the key aspects of this on butcher paper or electronic whiteboard.

In other words, use a general approach which begins with initial thinking. Follow that up with a discussion. Then ask people to extract themes from the discussion. Finally, discuss the meaning and significance of the themes.

If people are slow to warm up, it is useful to follow the initial thought with discussion in pairs. This enables people to "try out their words" in relative privacy before they have to express them publicly. (I suggest you give them a few minutes to get acquainted first.)

A more detailed description of this style of focus group can be found in the archived file "focus" (see below). The archived file presents what you might call a mid-range description — not too detailed, not too brief. Here are some issues that warrant more detailed attention. These also illustrate some general principles about information collection, especially when it is done in a group setting.

Selecting the panel

For the usual form of focus group the panel is typically not very diverse. A homogeneous group allows easier discussion. People are more likely to build on one another's ideas without undue conflict.

Because of the more controlled processes in a structured focus group, greater within-group variety can be managed. A structured focus group also allows more variation in numbers of participants. You may be able to create a climate where differences are explored with interest rather than confrontation. If so, even greater variety may be useful.

I like to use highly-diverse groups, such as those you might put together as a maximum-diversity sample. At the same time, I give a lot of attention to creating a climate where people feel able to disagree without having to arrive at a conclusion or win others over to their point of view.

If well facilitated, diverse panels can offer a number of potential advantages. Here are two in particular:

- You can cover a greater range of the views within the wider community or organisation.
- More diversity means more differences of opinion. In turn, that can allow deeper interpretation. It is often the exploration of differences that can lead the participants (and the facilitators) to a better understanding. But of course this requires more skilled facilitation.

Setting the scene

You can have more influence over the process if you have established the beginnings of a person-to-person relationship with each of the panel members. (This is true of action research generally and not just focus groups.) For this reason I try to make contact with each participant just before the session begins.

To this end, I often ask participants to arrive a little before the planned start. Coffee, fruit juice and biscuits are available. I use this time to talk briefly with people as they arrive. I also memorise their names. (I'm poor at remembering names. I have to make a special effort to do this. But I believe it's worth the effort.) This initial contact also gives the panel members a chance to ask any questions they have about the process or the purpose.

Some people feel anxious until they have made a connection with at least one other person. It is often useful, after you have introduced yourself to someone, to introduce them to someone else.

Creating a climate

During the discussions differences are likely to arise. The climate of the whole focus group depends a lot on how these are dealt with.

I believe this is so important that I try to do several different things to encourage expression of differences. For example ...

- Using processes which explicitly encourage the identification of different views:

  "I'll ask each of you to present your opinion, and I'll record it as you do. For the moment, don't worry about whether it is the same as, or different to, anyone else's.

  "When I've recorded everyone's opinion, I'll ask you to help me identify the agreements and disagreements. Then we can try to work out what those disagreements mean."

- Giving instructions which encourage mutual inquiry:

  "I encourage you to speak your mind. I'd prefer that you were not too belligerent about it. But I'd rather that you were tactless than that you left something important unsaid."

- Encouraging an inquiring reaction to disagreement, treating it as data:

  "We don't have to reach agreement. In fact, it's important to me to know what different views there are, and how much disagreement there is. You can help me by speaking honestly. I also appreciate it if you notice disagreement and bring it to my attention. The existence of disagreement is important information."

- Responding to disagreement with interest and enthusiasm:

  "Thank you, Jane. It seems that you and Fred have different opinions. That's great! If we can understand how those differences arise, that will be valuable indeed."

- Discouraging open confrontation in a way which still elicits open discussion:

  "Good, there's another difference of opinion. Thank you, Jack. That's useful. I'd also encourage you to find some way of saying it that informs us rather than trying to persuade us. If you had said to me

what you said to Alex, I'd want to defend my point of view. And I don't think that's useful for present purposes."

Pursuing explanations

I think that some general principles of qualitative data use are relevant here. I've touched on them before; they are important enough to warrant some repetition.

Idiosyncratic information

When only one person from a large community or organisation tells you something, it may not be very informative. In general, then, I suggest you largely ignore idiosyncratic information if the other participants also ignore it.

(If that person is a key stakeholder you may choose not to ignore it. On balance, though, I think you will learn more from pursuing the agreements and disagreements.)

Agreement

When several people agree, I try to find out how widely that applies. So I look for exceptions. In effect, I am trying to find the *boundary* of the agreement. (There's an example in the next section.)

"Notice that everyone who has spoken so far has agreed about that. Don't let that discourage you from expressing a different view. It's important that we know the full range of opinions. So, who has a different view to offer?"

This is also part of the strategy of challenging your emerging data and interpretations. By the end of the study, it's good to be able to say that your interpretations survived many vigorous attempts to disconfirm them.

Disagreement

Agreements are useful. But for me the disagreements are the key. They lead me to a deeper understanding. They can often be the source of new and creative ways of thinking about what is happening. They also help me to identify my own assumptions.

Sometimes disagreements emerge spontaneously. Person A says "X is good"; person B says "X is bad". I can then explore *why* that is so. I can also, in a process akin to dispute resolution, help A and B to explore why.

On other occasions disagreements emerge because I go searching for them. Suppose that there seems to be agreement that "X is good", for example. I can ask for exceptions.

> "When *isn't* X good?" "Who *doesn't* think X is good?" "What's *not* good about X?" "What would it take for X to be even better?"

And so on. When an exception is identified I can then try to find an explanation for it.

A caution ... "Why" questions are tricky. Asked "Why?", most people try to give an explanation. The difficulty is that, lacking an explanation, they may invent one. If you and they then believe it, you may lead each other on a fruitless detour. I usually prefer to find some other way of asking "Why?". For example

> "What are the important differences between those who believe X and those who believe Y?" Or "How do those differences arise?"

Introducing other information

You may often use a number of focus groups to explore a single topic or issue. The later groups then give you a chance to challenge the data and interpretations emerging from earlier groups.

You may combine focus groups with some other form of data collection. This is most commonly done for the purposes of triangulation: when two different techniques yield the same conclusion, you can have more faith in that conclusion.

In both instances it is often useful to introduce information and interpretations collected earlier. When do you introduce new information? This is an important question, as it can have an influence on how the information is treated. I prefer to start the current focus group as described above. After they have provided their own themes, I then summarise for them the findings from earlier groups.

Alternatively, you can complete the interpretation phase, and then present other information. The panel can then be asked to respond to the other information, and explain the differences. Again, you can give particular attention to agreements and disagreements. You can again seek explanations for the disagreements.

Archived resources

An important part of facilitation is modelling an open and non-defensive style of interaction. The archived file communicn, mentioned in an earlier session, is relevant here:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/communicn.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/communicn.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/communicn.txt

I've already mentioned (in the previous session) the file datadriv, an account of the data-driven procedure of seeking exceptions to agreements, and explanations for disagreements:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/datadriv.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/datadriv.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/datadriv.txt

Other reading

Sage (who are probably the leading US publishers of qualitative research resources) publish at least five useful books on focus groups (and quite possibly more):

Barbour, Rosaline S., and Kitzinger, Jenny, eds. (1999) *Developing focus group research: politics, theory and practice*. London: Sage.

Krueger, R.A. (1988) *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Morgan, D.L. (1988) *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Stewart, D.W. and Shamdasani, P.N. (1990) *Focus groups: theory and practice*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Vaughn, Sharon; Schumm, Jeanne Shay; and Sinagub, Jane (1996) *Focus group interviews in education and psychology.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

and, so Sage don't have the field entirely to themselves:

Bader, Gloria E., and Rossi, Catherine A. (1998) *Focus groups: a step by step guide*. San Diego, Ca.: The Bader Group.

Edmunds, Holly (1999) *The focus group research handbook*. Chicago, Ill.: NTC Business Books in conjunction with the American Marketing Association.

Greenbaum, Thomas L. (1988) *The practical handbook and guide to focus group research*. Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books.

Activities

A thought experiment:

For the next few days make a note of occasions when you find yourself disagreeing with people. When you have some quiet time, reflect on their beliefs, and

yours. What can you learn about the assumptions that underpin your beliefs? How can you explain why you and others sometimes think differently? How can you engage more constructively with people when you and they disagree?

An individual activity:

This can usefully follow the individual activity above. For the next few days explore ways of turning potential conflicts into dialectical discussions:

- Keep an ear open for anyone who says something you disagree with. When this occurs, listen to what they have to say before you respond. Use a non-confronting form of inquiry to learn more about their views. Then find a way of stating your view so that you engage them in mutual inquiry.
- From time to time, disputes may erupt between other people. Watch for these. When you notice one, experiment with ways of using your own curiosity and non-defensiveness to defuse their conflict. Note: some ways of defusing conflict do so by cutting off the debate. The aim here is to convert the debate into something non-adversarial.

For your learning group:

Choose a facilitator. Choose a topic (perhaps one that is relevant to one of your projects). The facilitator then conducts a structured focus group on that topic.

Build into the process a number of review periods. After the initial discussion might be one such place. After deciding priorities and meanings might be another.

———

I've described a focus group which uses structure to enhance the quality of information. The discussion has also provided a vehicle for talking about some of the principles of process management. Next session we'll examine some other data collection techniques.

In this sessions's trigger I want to draw together two different themes.

Implicit in many recent posts, and explicit in some, is the issue of *roles*. Who does what. In particular, there are issues about the relative roles of those doing the research and those being researched.

My questions about roles are as follows.

- When is it better to involve those being researched as full partners in the research process?
- When is it better for only the researcher to manage the research process?

It seems to me that these choices are as often driven by ideology as by reason. That's not necessarily a bad thing, in my view. But it makes it more important to ask, in each case ...

- What are the *dis*advantages of doing so?
- What, if anything, can be done about those disadvantages?

Which brings me to my second theme. It seems to me that sometimes you can guess at the disciplinary background of someone by their views about good research. To me, that implies that it is sometimes hard for us to escape our early training.

In turn, that suggests that our early training can inhibit both our creativity and our critical abilities.

To bring that closer to home ...

In areol, I speak from particular education and experience. How might I continue to do so without seeming to argue for my own way as some "best way"?

10 evaluation as action research

... in which the relevance of the earlier sessions on action research, participation and rigour, are noted as relevant to the practice of evaluation, and in which the motives of the evaluator and those who employ her are identified as very important [31]

Have you ever worked in an organisation where there was regular appraisal? If so, how well did it work? When you were to be appraised, did you look forward to it? If you were the appraiser, how pleasant did you find it? For both appraiser and appraisee, how could it have been improved? Appraisal is a form of evaluation. If evaluation is regarded in the same way as appraisal, what implications does that have for how it is done?

In this session ...

- organisational appraisal systems
- why evaluate — to enable or to control?
- evaluation as action research
- evaluation as action *and* research

31. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session10.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session10.html

The centrepiece of this session is an examination of appraisal in work settings. I've done that because that is where the systems are most formalised and the effects most easily identified.

But I think the conclusions you draw have importance in other settings too: communities, families, social occasions. I invite you to keep these other settings in mind. I think you can extend some of your conclusions to evaluation in those settings.

This is the first of a number of sessions on approaches to evaluation which draw on action-research-like processes and principles.

Action research, I think, lends itself to evaluation. (You could almost say that action research is evaluation, of a sort. You think; you act; you evaluate.) Next session I'll describe a particular evaluation process, the Snyder process, which applies many action research principles.

Before we come to that, though, I invite you to consider the nature of evaluation. Here is a thought experiment ...

Word goes around that your employers have hired someone to evaluate the productivity and effectiveness of all the people in the section or organisation. Rumour has it that a detailed report on each employee will be given to your immediate superior, among others, though perhaps not to you.

What would be some of the thoughts that go through your mind when you hear this? What would be your hopes? Your fears?

My prediction is that you would be curious about the results. However, I suspect you would also have some doubts. I think you would wonder about the accu-

racy of the results. I would expect you to be at least a little apprehensive about the motivation of the organisation in hiring the evaluator.

I'd expect, too, that you would have some misgivings about the use that might be made of the results. I wouldn't be surprised if you were a bit apprehensive about who would report the results to you, and how and what they would do about the results.

But read on ...

You arrive at work one morning to find an envelope on your desk. When you open it, there is a note inside, from the evaluator, and a further envelope. The note says:

"Inside the envelope is a report on your productivity and a comparison with the productivity of your colleagues. I acknowledge that they may not be entirely accurate though I've tried hard to make them as accurate as I can.

"No-one has seen these results except me. I have no intention of reporting them to anyone else. You may take the envelope and destroy it. You can open it and read the report. You can discuss it with others if you wish.

"If you read it, it is then entirely your decision what to do about it, if anything. If you would like to do something I would be pleased to provide whatever help I can."

Would you open the inner envelope and read the report? With what hopes and fears? Has your attitude changed at all? If so, in what respects?

I would guess that your attitude is probably now a little more positive, though you may still be annoyed and perhaps angry.

What else could the evaluator have done for you to be *more* positive?

As a term, "evaluation" has a bad odour in some circles. This arises mostly, I think, from doubts about the motives of evaluators and those who hire them. I think the consequence is clear. If we wish someone to act on our evaluation reports, we may need to be clear about their motives and about ours.

I have some biases here. It's simpler for both of us if I reveal them. (You are at liberty to decide your own biases, or avoid any bias if you can do so.) To my mind, the single most important aspect of evaluation is the motive of its users — is it to enable people to do better what they want to do? Or is it to control them?

(This applies to more than just evaluation. It's also true of leadership, and teaching, and parenthood, and consulting, and increasingly — at least here in Australia — of politics. And, for that matter, of living.)

My experience has been that most people would much rather do a good job than a poor job. (Interpret "job" as broadly as you wish.) Some have given up hope of being able to do so. Many are still trying. Some of those who have given up can be retrieved.

So enablement makes a lot more sense to me than control. In what follows I'll try to describe evaluation processes from that perspective. You can, of course, choose your own perspective.

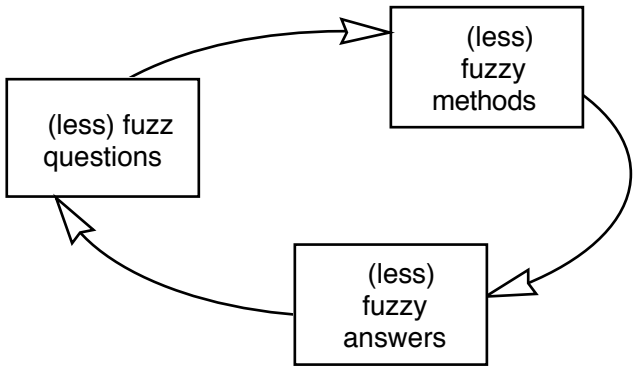
By now it is probably clear why I think of action research and evaluation as closely related. To my mind, both function well when they pursue understanding *and* change. For reasons of both ethics and practicality, both may benefit from wide and genuine participation.

Evaluation throughout action research

As I said, I'll be describing a specific process. I'll also be referring you to archived resources which describe it in some detail. However, you could take

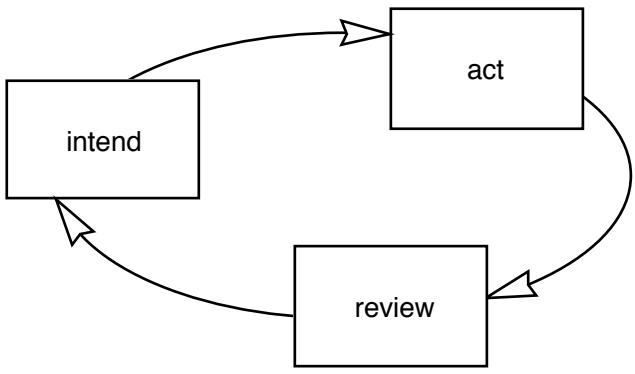
any overall action research approach and apply it to an evaluation task. That is pretty much what happened in one of the case studies reported earlier.

For example, consider the cycle described in one of the early sessions:



You might start an evaluation with as broad a question as "What goes on around here?" — or, as in the evaluation case study, "Tell me about ...". The answers can then direct you to a better sample, better questions, better methods. And, eventually, better answers.

Consider, too, one other cycle which we examined:



You will recall that this can also be regarded as critical reflection before, during and after action. In other words, each phase of each cycle of action research contains an evaluative component.

Evaluation as action and research

This quote from Lee Cronbach et. al. [32] captures my biases well:

> "The distinction between studies that ask how good a service is and those that ask how the service can be improved has been around for decades. [...] As we see it, evaluations are used almost entirely in a formative manner when they *are* used."

In other words, if your evaluation is intended to be used, then it is more like formative evaluation than summative evaluation. ("Formative" means, roughly, addressing the question: How can this program be improved? Not: How good is this program?, which is more the question of summative evaluation.)

The emphasis in previous sessions has been on action research, and its pursuit of the twin aims of action and research. Think back over those sessions ...

The early sessions were about participation. Some evaluators prefer to maintain some independence from the stakeholders. The stakeholders are most commonly involved only as informants. If you wish the evaluation to lead to successful change, you might wish to consider the appropriate level of participation.

The more recent sessions have been about rigour. Their thrust has been towards those means of achieving rigour which also allow flexibility, responsibility, and participation. You might like to consider if, using these methods, you might achieve an adequate level of rigour and participation at the same time.

For me, the issues in evaluation are the same as those canvassed earlier. Virtue can still be found in good entry and contracting, relevant stakeholder involvement, and good relationships. Virtue can also be found in multiple sources of information, cyclic processes, and a tireless quest for *disconfirming* evidence.

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32. Cronbach, Lee J.; Ambron, Sueann R.; Dornbusch, Sanford M.; Hess, Robert D.; Hornik, Robert C.; Phillips, D.C.; Walker, Decker F.; and Weiner, Stephen S. (1980) *Toward reform of program evaluation: aims, methods and institutional arrangements*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Archived resources

There is an archived paper qualeval on evaluation. It uses the Snyder process to illustrate some points about evaluation in general, and qualitative evaluation in particular. It is written from an action research perspective.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/qualeval.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/qualeval.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/qualeval.txt

There are also some relevant bibliographies on the archive.

Patricia Rogers has prepared a bibliography on evaluation and meta-evaluation. You'll find it in the archive with the name meta-eval_bib:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/meta-eval-bib.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/meta-eval-bib.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/meta-eval-bib.txt

Marcia Conner has included some material on evaluation in her training and development bibliography. It's in the archive, with the title trdbooks.txt:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/trdbooks.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/trdbooks.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/trdbooks.txt

The action research bibliography biblio, which is mostly annotated, contains quite a few works on evaluation:

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/biblio.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/biblio.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/biblio.txt

Some other archived resources (not specifically mentioned in this session but some mentioned in previous sessions) describe various forms of data collection. All of these can be used for action research, or for evaluation:

voting. The use of voting techniques to collapse long lists, or arrange them in priority

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/voting.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/voting.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/voting.txt

delphi. Mentioned previously, a dialectic process

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/delphi.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/delphi.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/delphi.txt

focus. A structured form of focus group, as previously mentioned

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/focus.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/focus.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/focus.txt

gfa. Group feedback analysis, an alternative to survey-feedback

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/gfa.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/gfa.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/gfa.txt

search. A future oriented goal-setting or visioning process which can be used for data collection when agreement is likely to be easily reached

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/search.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/search.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/search.txt

options. A dialectical process for choosing between two alternatives

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/options.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/options.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/options.txt

Other reading

John Owen's brief and relatively-practical overview of evaluation has recently been reissued, this time with collaboration from Patricia Rogers:

Owen, J.M. with Rogers, P.J. (1999) *Program evaluation: forms and approaches*, international edition. London: Sage.

For reference I like Michael Scriven's alphabetically-arranged encyclopedia. It's not bedtime reading, but I think it's valuable:

Scriven, M. (1991) *Evaluation thesaurus*, fourth edition. Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage.

A fifth edition may be available by the time you read this.

For a detailed description of an action-research-like evaluation approach, Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln have a process they call fourth generation evaluation. The detailed description is:

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, Ca.: Sage.

If you can get hold of it, there is a brief and readable overview of some of the features of their approach:

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1990) Fourth generation evaluation: an 'interview' with Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln. *Evaluation Journal of Australia*, 2(3), 3-14.

They take a strong constructivist approach (at times they seem to assume the world is in people's imagination, not "out there"). Whether or not you would go as far in this regard as they do, I think you can still use their approach to good effect.

Michael Patton has also described an action-research-like approach to evaluation, very participative and responsive:

Patton, M.Q. (1997) *Utilization-focussed evaluation*, third edition. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage.

A fourth edition may be available.

There are a number of high-quality mailing lists which deal with evaluation. I quite like the list evaltalk, sponsored by the American Evaluation Association. though the amount of traffic is sometimes overwhelming. The regular participation of such people as Michael Scriven, Jerome Winston, Patricia Rogers, and many other experienced evaluators lifts the quality of material.

To subscribe, send the message

subscribe evaltalk Firstname Lastname
to listserv@ua1vm.ua.edu

substituting your own name for "Firstname Lastname".

Similar comments can be made about govteval. As its name suggests, it focuses more on public sector evaluation. Less apparent is that it is more cosmopolitan in its approach, in my view, than evaltalk.

To subscribe, send the message

subscribe govteval
to majordomo@nasionet.net

(Its listserver is "majordomo", which gets upset if you include your name.)

Activities

A thought experiment:

There's one, above, in the text of this session.

An individual activity:

Most people are starved of feedback most of the time. Other people tell us very little about how we "come across". It's hard for us to know how others experience us. Soliciting feedback can be a useful experience in several ways, in addition to sensitising us to some of the traps of giving feedback.

Choose some aspect of your behaviour or performance that you'd like to know more about. Choose two or three people who can comment on that aspect. It may work better in social or community settings than at work.

I suggest you do it in four phases:

1 Guess at what you think they will report.

2 Approach them, and first talk with them about the difficulty of getting accurate feedback.

3 Ask for the feedback.

4 Say it back to them, in your own words, to check that you've understood it.

Take some time after each conversation to record what you learned about yourself, and about giving and getting feedback.

For your learning group:

The individual activity, above, is a useful precursor to this activity.

In your learning group, working individually, list the main strengths and weaknesses of your group as a whole. List, also, the most important contribution that each group member (including yourself) makes to the group. Then compare notes.

In this session we've begun to explore some of the "big picture" aspects of evaluation. We've touched on the use of an action research approach to evaluation,

and of the presence of evaluation within the action research cycle. I've suggested that evaluation (like many endeavours) may be used to control people, or to enable them to be more effective. I've indicated that the emphasis in areol will be on evaluation as action research, for enablement.

The next session begins an examination of the Snyder evaluation process.

Darts

... in which a hypothetical game of darts is used to raise some issues about the quality of feedback in much of our working lives (and elsewhere). [33]

Imagine the following scenario ...

You have just had your first encounter with darts. A group of people are playing it, with enthusiasm, in your local hotel. Noticing your interest, they ask if you would like to join in.

"I'd like to," you say, "But I don't know the game."

They offer to teach you.

One of them places a blindfold over your eyes. You feel yourself turned round two or three times and briefly held facing a particular direction. You presume that is where the dart board is. Someone places three darts into your hand.

"Here, have a go."

You throw the three darts in what you hope is the right direction.

You think you hear a few laughs. It's hard to tell — the pub is a noisy place.

Another three darts are placed in your hand. You try again.

33. This document is based on part of a workshop on individual performance planning, written for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1990.

(Right now, how are you feeling? If you were prepared to say what you feel like saying, what would it be?)

... and then another three. ... and another three.

"How am I going?" you ask.

"Not bad for a beginner", you are told. "Two actually hit the board, for a score of 23. All but three of the rest hit the correct wall."

Absurd?

Of course. At the very least you would expect ...

(What would you expect? If you are going to learn darts effectively, what are the minimum conditions? And what else could be done, beyond these minimum conditions, to make it an effective and enjoyable experience?)

I think that at the very least you would expect to be given enough information about the essential rules to be able to get started. I imagine you would be astonished if someone put a blindfold on you.

Playing darts normally, you begin to get feedback from the moment every dart leaves your hand. You soon learn which actions on your part lead to success and which do not.

If you are able to watch some good players and model your action on them, so much the better. A little bit of supportive coaching doesn't go astray either.

And yet, which of the two conditions most resembles the feedback you are given in your job? In your studies? Elsewhere? Do you get immediate, ongoing, accurate, direct, unfiltered, unthreatening feedback?

Or is your work like learning darts blindfolded?

(Think of the work of you and your team. Which of the two conditions does your job most closely resemble? Do you get constant, immediate and accurate feedback which comes directly to you, uninterpreted by others? Or do you get occasional and vague feedback in very general terms, selectively interpreted by someone else?

(Probably somewhere between those extremes.

(On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the work of you and your team? Assume that "1" means "like learning darts blindfolded; "10" means "immediate, ongoing, accurate, direct, unfiltered, unthreatening feedback."

The coaching makes an important difference. We now accept in most fields of sport that a sportsperson benefits from a coach. We are poor observers of our own behaviour, and a coach can provide a valuable outside perspective.

We also know that most coaches regard themselves as partly responsible for the motivation of the sportspeople they are coaching.

But motivation isn't something other people do to us. Motivation, for better or worse, arises from the needs which we seek to satisfy. Feedback can help us become better informed about how we might satisfy our needs — about the results that are worth pursuing, and what we can do to pursue them successfully.

In other words, feedback can raise the goals which we set for ourselves. Positive feedback works best, because negative feedback can have the same depressing effect on goals as no feedback. [34]

34. There is evidence that positive feedback encourages people to set higher goals. Both negative feedback and no feedback depress goal setting. For example see Latham, G.P. (1986), Job performance and appraisal. In C.L. Cooper and I.T. Robertson (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organisational psychology.* New York: Wiley.

We know all this, of course, from our own experience and understanding. No-one would dream of learning darts blindfolded.

Despite that, we regularly blindfold the people we supervise at work and elsewhere. We regularly tolerate being blindfolded by our superiors and those in authority.

If we could only use at work the experience we display in some other settings, we could make work and life more satisfying and more enjoyable.

What *is* it about words like "evaluation", "appraisal" and the like? Why do they so often produce such defensive responses?

Defensiveness, it seems to me, arises in the main from one or other of two situations. (Yes, I'm oversimplifying.) One is that another person's attack on us triggers it. The other is that we imagine that attack, and respond defensively out of our expectations or guilt.

In both instances our perceptions are the same: that we are under threat. And in both instances it is our perceptions that we are responding to.

Now, suppose we are the ones doing the appraisal or evaluation. What then? What can we do to minimise the defensiveness?

To answer to this question, it seems to me, is to identify many of the most important principles underpinning effective evaluation and a range of similar processes.

Is that your perception?

Most of us experience evaluation, in some sense, from both sides. Sometimes we evaluate. Sometimes we are evaluated. What we learn from each of these can be applied to the other.

When you evaluate, do you take into account your experience of what it is like to be evaluated?

One of the features of action research is that it includes evaluation as part of each turn of the spiral.

What can we learn about effectiveness in action research from our consideration of evaluation and appraisal?

11 the Snyder process

... in which an overview of the Snyder evaluation process is given, incorporating the three phases of process, outcome and short-cycle evaluation [35]

Take a moment to consider — how good is the feedback you receive on your performance? What sort of feed- back would you find most useful? How might it be provided so that you would use it? ... and then consider further — how much do you know about what people think of you and what you do? What would you like to know about this? In what form would you prefer to receive it

In this session:

- a systems model
- the three phases of the Snyder evaluation process: process evaluation, outcome evaluation, and short cycle evaluation
- the fourth phase — meta-evaluation.

35. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session11.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session11.html

This, the second of the sessions on evaluation, takes up a particular evaluation process: the Snyder process. [36] I begin by describing the systems model which underlies parts of the process. I then give an overview of the three-phase process itself.

I should mention that this is by no means the only approach to evaluation. Various other approaches, especially those that are both qualitative and participative, are likely to resemble action research. Many action research processes can be pressed into service for evaluation purposes. There are also many approaches in addition to those that resemble action research.

I choose this approach because I use it often. As well, it lends itself to participative approaches, which I prefer. It includes a variety of approaches within itself — this can be a benefit. It can be integrated easily and effectively with strategic planning, and may even rescue that often-misused process from ignominy. Most of this will become more apparent as we proceed.

Above all, it's an approach for practitioners. I've had good results using it participatively to bring about change. The group being evaluated usually begin to change their behaviour by the third or fourth step into the first phase.

I invite you to notice the way it builds understanding as it proceeds. This, I think, is an important reason for its effectiveness. As people come to understand how they achieve their objectives they become more effective at achieving them. As a bonus, you'll find it not to difficult to learn if you don't get lost in the detail.

A systems model

The Snyder process uses systems concepts. It assumes that the organisation or unit or project or program being evaluated can be viewed as a "system".

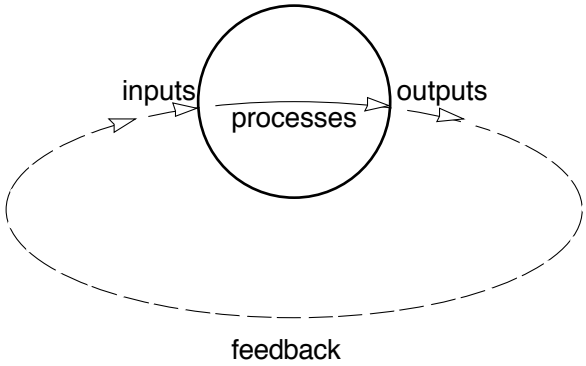
36. I learned the essentials of this process from a former colleague, Wes Snyder, hence its name. It has been much modified over the years, but I think he still approves of its essential nature.

Systems models treat a program (or whatever) as something which transforms inputs into outputs. Resources into achievements.

inputs → processes of transformation → outputs

By *monitoring* the achievements you provide yourself with feedback. The feedback allows you to make better choices: about inputs to use; about activities; about outputs to pursue.

A simple systems model looks like this:



The Snyder process uses three levels of output. They take place over different time spans. Combined with inputs and processes this gives five elements in all.

(You will find that you will be able to use this collection of elements for a variety of purposes. I have colleagues who use it in one-to-one counselling and the like.)

The five elements are:

resources →	activities →	effects → targets → ideals
inputs	processes	outputs

In more detail:

resources. These are the inputs. They consist of anything (time, money, materials, etc.) consumed by the activities. (They also include anything, like skills, which are not "consumed" but are required and are not plentiful.)

activities. These are the processes. They are the activities and operations carried out as part of the program (or whatever it is being evaluated). They include what people do, day by day and moment by moment.

effects. (An abbreviation for "immediate effects".) These are the outcomes which result as the activities are carried out: the immediate results of the activities. There are intended and unintended effects.

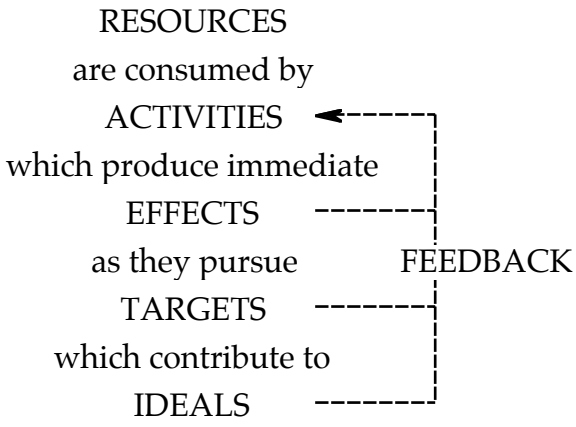
targets. (Sometimes called objectives.) These are the identified outcomes which the program pursues. (In the corporate literature they go by a variety of names.)

ideals. (Often called "vision".) This is the "better world" to which the activities are presumed to contribute in the long run. The ideals are set in the future, and are usually defined in very general ways. They are more something to aim for rather than something that will actually be achieved.

For convenience, you can think of targets as being tied to the planning cycle of the program. This is often a year. For some purposes it may be more or less than this. In comparison the immediate effects are short term. They take place *as the activities are carried out*. The ideals are very long term, and are probably unachievable: they are the vision which guides and motivates the program. The timing is as follows:

effects	targets	ideals
immediately	at end of current planning cycle	indeterminate

In partial summary:



Why don't you try it out? Choose some important activity you engage in. Identify the other components, from resources through to ideals. Or choose your present activity. You're reading this. What are the resources and immediate effects? What is your best guess about the targets I think you might have achieved, and the vision of a better world which encourages me to provide this material?

This systems model is a categorisation. It helps to manage the data collected. It also provides a framework. It underlies each stage of the process, which is now described.

The Snyder process sets up feedback loops. These allow stakeholders to better understand and manage their activities and resource use. The stakeholders are thus better able to achieve worthwhile and desired goals.

An overview of the process

The Snyder process has three phases. Each addresses a separate form of evaluation. Each builds on the preceding phase or phases.

A caution: In this and subsequent sessions, I address some important issues very superficially. Entry, contracting, identifying stakeholders, and building relationships are given only a cursory treatment.

However, these are at least as important as in other action research processes. Given the scepticism about evaluation in many quarters, they may well be more important.

I assume you will use the earlier sessions to fill in these gaps.

In addition, the process as described below doesn't pay explicit attention to what the *environment* of the program or unit is doing. You may therefore want to include, as part of the ideals, an examination of the changes going on in the relevant environment. (Many vision-seeking exercises include this, and may be pressed into service.)

In the following descriptions, I assume a participative approach to evaluation. The evaluator acts more as a process consultant, guiding the process used for evaluation. The actual evaluation is done by the participants. This is done on the grounds that it is usually participants who have to turn the evaluation into change. Their understanding and commitment matter more than that of the evaluator.

On occasion, you may well have reason to do an evaluation non-participatively. If so, the same overall process can be used. On yet other occasions you may be working with participants who are, or can become, sufficiently skilled in the processes. You can then usefully involve them as co-researchers.

Each of the three phases of the Snyder process is a different form of evaluation, seeking to answer different questions:

A. The process evaluation component

The goal of the process evaluation [37] is for the stakeholders to understand the *way in which* they achieve what they achieve. Unintended achievements, good or bad, are important.

The questions it seeks to answer are to do with the way the program or unit operates. What resources are consumed by what activities? Are these the activities which appear to contribute most to targets and vision? What unintended effects do they have?

The process evaluation tries to answer these questions by addressing the links between the elements. It operates by trying to identify:

- which activities consume which resources;
- which activities produce which immediate effects, intended and unintended;
- which immediate effects contribute to which future targets; which immediate effects hinder achieving those targets;
- which targets are likely to contribute to which ideals.

It does this, in general, by identifying and comparing adjacent elements — for example, ideals and targets. It then analyses which targets and ideals are associated. Mismatches between targets and ideals then become the catalyst for changing targets, ideals, or both.

It is possible to do *only* a process evaluation, and then switch to action planning. However, I think the Snyder process is most valuable when it also includes all three phases.

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37. There are difficulties with terminology. Some writers equate process evaluation with formative evaluation. Others make a distinction. In any event, "formative evaluation" is the term most often used. I persist with the term "process evaluation" because to my mind, that is what it is. It seeks to help stakeholders understand the process by which they achieve (or don't achieve) what they set out to achieve.
Similarly, some writers equate outcome evaluation and summative evaluation. Some don't. I use the term outcome evaluation because it seeks to monitor outcomes, to the extent that that's possible.

In short, the process evaluation phase seeks to understand how the unit or program operates. It does this by examining the *links* between the elements:

B. The outcome evaluation component

The goal of this phase is to develop performance indicators. These allow the achievements of the program or unit to be monitored.

Outcome evaluation often seeks to answer the question: Is this program achieving its goals? Or, Is this program better than program X?

My personal view is that these questions are seldom answerable. Therefore, in the Snyder process, this phase seeks instead to determine how performance can be monitored. The performance indicators developed in this phase can then be used to set up feedback loops.

In general, the Snyder process does this by finding present indicators of future targets and ideals. Ideals are not evaluable in any real sense. Targets can be evaluated when you get there; but that may be too late. Indicators are here in the present.

The process for identifying indicators is simple enough. You start with the ideals, and follow them back until you find something present that you *can* evaluate. To anticipate the topic of a following session ... The criteria I will be suggesting for indicators is that they are an adequate sample of:

- the ideals,
- resource use,
- intended immediate effects, and
- unintended immediate effects.

As far as possible, I suggest you don't use performance indicators of *activities*. That assumes that there is one right way to do something. It may well be that different people can achieve outcomes in different ways. Activities are often eas-

ily measured. Unfortunately, the activities which work best for some people may not be the best way for others to achieve the outcomes. Activity-based indicators may constrain people, and ignore individual differences.

In short, the outcome evaluation phase builds on the understanding achieved from the process evaluation phase. It uses this understanding to identify performance indicators which can serve as proxies for future targets and ideals:

C. The short-cycle evaluation component

The goal of this component is to create a self-improving system. By helping stakeholders set up feedback loops *which indicate ideals*, it makes it easier for the stakeholders to monitor their performance and steer the program or unit towards the ideals.

Short-cycle evaluation seeks to answer the questions, on an ongoing basis: How are we doing? And what could we be doing differently?

It does this by setting up feedback loops which provide regular and relevant information on performance. This feedback is given directly to those whose performance is being indicated. They control it, and are encouraged to modify it if it doesn't work.

In summary, the short-cycle component builds on both process and outcome components. It sets up feedback loops using performance indicators that can be used to guide activities:

I said there were three phases. And there are. Each addresses a different form of evaluation, threading them together to produce better understanding and better possibilities for monitoring and improvement.

There is, in addition, an important fourth component.

D. The meta-evaluation component

It isn't a fourth phase — rather, it accompanies and informs all three phases. Usually, it is called meta-evaluation. It can be provided by carrying out the whole process within an action research framework of *intend* → *act* → *review.* In other words, each step is preceded (the *intend*), accompanied (the *act*) and followed (the *review*) by critical reflection.

In addition, the indicators include some which monitor the ongoing short-cycle evaluation itself. From time to time after the evaluation is completed, the program team or unit is encouraged to review the extent to which:

- their ideals and targets are still relevant;
- their indicators are working effectively; and
- they are making effective use of the feedback they receive.

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In summary:

This session has presented an overview of the content model which guides the Snyder process, and the three phases of the Snyder process. The content model identifies five elements which are threaded together:

resources → activities → effects → targets → ideals

The three phases are:

- process evaluation, which seeks to understand the links between these elements;
- outcome evaluation, which uses this understanding to identify performance indicators;
- short-cycle evaluation, which uses these indicators to set up feedback to monitor ongoing performance.

All of this is accompanied, before and after the evaluation, by regular critical review (the meta-evaluation) in the style of action research.

Archived resources

The archived file qualeval has already been mentioned. It uses the Snyder process to illustrate some issues related to qualitative research and evaluation.

Two files provide descriptions of the Snyder process:

snyder is a fairly detailed description, with a brief rationale given for each of the major steps

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder.txt

snyder-b is a briefer description of the same process.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder-b.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder-b.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder-b.txt

Other reading

Check the bibliographies mentioned in the previous session. The entries in the file biblio are mostly annotated, helping you choose something relevant to your interests.

Apart from the archived files mentioned above, there are no easily-accessed works specifically on the Snyder process. Useful and readable overviews of qualitative evaluation generally are provided by Michael Patton's work. His best known work is probably

Patton, M.Q. (1997) *Utilisation-focussed evaluation*, third edition. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage.

There is a review article which provides an interesting account of the changes in evaluation practice to meed the demands of a complex world:

Cook, T.D. and Shadish, W.R. (1986) Program evaluation: the worldly science. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 37, 193-232.

There are reflections in the Snyder process of a number of other aspects of current organisational practice. There are similarities to strategic planning:

Kaufman, R., and Herman, J. (1991) Strategic planning in education: rethinking, restructuring, revitalising. Lancaster, Pa.: Technomic.

Kaufman uses a content model which, despite its different labels, is very similar to the five-element Snyder model. He uses the labels *inputs* (raw materials), *processes* ("how-to-do-its"), *products* (en-route results), *outputs* (end-product deliverables) and *outcomes* (the effects of the outputs).

Short-cycle evaluation allows a program or unit to become a self-improving system. This has similarities to the notion of continuous improvement (in Japanese, "kaizen") in Total Quality Management

Imai, M. (1986) *Kaizen: the key to Japan's competitive success*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

and to the notion of a learning organisation

Senge, P. (1990) *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organisation*. New York: Doubleday.

I suspect that the best organisations and programs have often behaved in certain ways. These ways are re-identified and re-labelled from time to time to create a new fashion.

Activities

A thought experiment:

See the activity Darts on page 196. It invites you to imagine a game of darts. That's the suggested thought experiment for this session — to imagine playing dart blindfolded. Then compare your usual work to that experience.

The on line document can be found at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/darts.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/darts.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/darts.txt

An individual activity:

If you memorise two aspects of the Snyder process, you give yourself a tool you can use to understand how and why you do what you do. First, the content model:

resources → activities → effects → targets → ideals

Second, the three-phase overview of the process:

(a) process evaluation: understanding the links between the elements

(b) performance indicators which sample resource use, and intended and unintended immediate effects

(c) developing ways of providing feedback on those indicators.

I suggest you compile a diary at the end of a typical day, listing all of the activities you took part in. Then use the Snyder content model and process to think about those activities, their costs, and their effects.

For your learning group:

Over the next several sessions you will find your learning group activities more helpful, I think, if you have something you can use as an evaluation project.

In these sessions, I'll invite you to imagine carrying out the relevant parts of a Snyder evaluation with the stakeholders in that project. This will enable you to check that you can turn the step-by-step "recipes" into actual behaviour.

I suggest you use a group session to help each other choose some program or unit you know well enough to evaluate it. This can be a vehicle for these imaginary evaluations.

———

This session has presented an overview of the Snyder process. The next session will develop it further by examining some pieces of it in a little more detail.

Speaking for myself ...

(Check for yourself. Do you experience a mild temptation to accord more weight to it because I am the "teacher" on areol?)

I have a suspicion that control is an important issue in research and evaluation. I think it is one of the factors that is at the heart of much that ails our society and its relationships.

To recap what I've said in one of the sessions. We can adopt evaluation or research for the purposes of control, or to enable people to do more effectively what *they* wish to do. These motives are important dimensions of evaluation, and research, and management, and education, and parenting. And living.

Some examples —

It seems to me that, at most conferences I attend, a majority of speakers seek in their presentations to persuade people to their point of view.

In many organisations managers adopt more democratic methods. But are afraid ever to take them far enough. Often they retain control just in case something goes wrong. And in doing so, they persuade their team that the democracy isn't real.

Or they adopt a new way of doing things; but water down the bits they perceive as risky. And, thus incomplete, the new way doesn't work. For instance, read Deming on total quality management and then check the quality management systems in organisations you know.

To bring it closer to home, I've observed consultants and researchers and educators, among others. They are very often less democratic, to my eyes, than I think they intend to be. And more often than I like I catch myself doing this too.

As I've suggested above, I think some of it is caution. But part of it is also unwitting. It seems to me that those who have power and influence and privilege almost always underestimate how much they have and use.

It seems to me that power is invisible downwards.

Only those on whom it is exercised can perceive it; and sometimes even they do not. We often cooperate in our own subjugation.

Is this your experience, both when you have power and when you don't?

Many years ago I read the book *The authoritarian personality* [38] by Theodore Adorno and his colleagues. They wanted to know what aspect of the German mentality allowed the rise of Hitler. They concluded that the German people at that time were often characterised by an "authoritarian

38. Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D.J., and Sanford, N. (1950) The authoritarian personality. New York: Harper and Row.

personality". That is, they were obedient upwards and controlling downwards.

And I thought, thus are we all authoritarian. Most of our organisations, given their present form, would collapse in disarray if we were not.

How participative can you really be in the organisations you take part in?

This, I believe, is what we have to contend with in ourselves and in others. In attempting to be truly participative we are trying to overcome many many generations of conditioning.

This is no reason to avoid participation, I believe. It *is* reason to expect it to be a substantial challenge. It is reason therefore to devote more attention to it, and to seek feedback about it.

What do you think?

12 The Snyder process (2)

... in which I expand briefly on some features of the Snyder process evaluation phase, and examine in more detail the use of performance indicators in the outcome evaluation phase [39]

How do *you* monitor your performance in practice? If you could use only one indicator of your long term effectiveness, what would you choose? If you were using it only for your own insight, how effective would it be? If you set out to defeat it — to use it to *appear* to be effective — how would you go about that? And in the light of your last answer, what could you do to develop a more robust indicator?

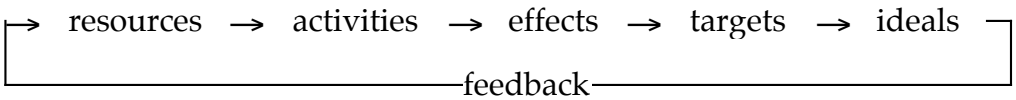
In this session:

- process evaluation
- performance indicators — their function, nature and development
- short cycle evaluation compared to other processes

39. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session12.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session12.html

The previous session dealt, in overview, with the Snyder evaluation process. In this session I want to focus on the identification and use of performance indicators. Before then, I'll summarise the Snyder process, and add a little more detail to the discussion of process evaluation.

You will recall that the Snyder process uses a particular systems model:



The development of performance indicators adds further and more explicit feedback.

The three phases of the process are defined in terms of this model.

The purpose of it all, if you carry out the whole process, is to improve whatever it is you are evaluating. More importantly, it allows the improvement to be ongoing.

Process evaluation

The first phase of the Snyder process is process evaluation. It examines the links between adjacent elements: between vision and targets; between targets (or vision) and immediate effects; and between resources and activities.

At the end of a participative process evaluation, participants understand better how activities change resources into outcomes. They know more, too, of the unintended outcomes of their activities, and of the long term consequences.

In other words, it relates the big picture and the moment to moment detail to each other. This will become more apparent as we proceed. So let me now add some detail which will help you to turn the descriptions into practice. The examination of links proceeds somewhat differently, depending on which links you are examining.

1 In comparing targets to ideals, look for orphans or near-orphans: targets which don't connect well to ideals, and ideals to which few targets contribute. Make appropriate changes to targets, or ideals, or both. In other words, improve the alignment of targets and ideals.

2 In comparing immediate effects to targets, again look for orphans. Again make appropriate changes. In effect you are asking, how well aligned are immediate effects and ideals? — and this is really asking, how well aligned are *activities* and ideals?

3 As the immediate effects are derived from the activities, there is not much point in a comparison. However, you can examine the unintended as well as the intended effects of each activity. In other words, what are the unintended (and often unseen) consequences of what we do? Are they beneficial or harmful?

4 The list of resources is similarly derived from the activities. Here, you are checking to see if the most resource-consuming activities are also the activities which contribute most to the ideals. Are we spending our resources where they will do the most good?

Now to the core topic of this session, performance indicators. You will recall that these were generated by the second phase of the Snyder process. They are used to provide ongoing feedback in the third phase.

The function of performance indicators

There are many reasons why you might want to carry out an evaluation; but they tend to boil down to three:

- To decide, simply, if the program (or whatever) is achieving what it is supposed to. To my mind, this is very difficult to achieve. I have decided that I'm not often prepared to put in the effort for such doubtful gains. Others might (and do) decide differently.

  In any event, the Snyder allows you to attempt this if you think it's worthwhile. It's done using the first and second phase of the process.

- To devise ways, in a one-time exercise, of improving the program. This is achievable, though it begs the questions of what an improvement might be. The Snyder process sidesteps this issue by letting the stakeholders define the outcomes. The first phase of the process addresses this. As it can be difficult for stakeholders to reach agreement you may wish to use a more elaborate first step to develop a vision.

  You might also want to examine how well the vision of the program fits with the present and likely future environment. (This was mentioned briefly in the previous session.)

- To set up within the program some means for ongoing monitoring and improvement. In other words, the intention is to create a self-improving system. This achieves what the second achieves, and then keeps on doing it. It requires all three phases. [40]

Performance indicators provide one of the important vehicles by which outcome evaluation, and ongoing improvement, are achieved.

Think back to the "playing darts blindfold" thought experiment on page "Darts" on page 196. Performance indicators can allow the people in the program to get feedback which is as direct and immediate as possible. In effect, performance indicators serve as proxies for ideals. Ideals can't be perceived directly, being general and in the future. Performance indicators can be thought of as necessary (though not sufficient) proxies that indicate that you are taking steps on the way to those ideals.

40. You may think there is an apparent contradiction is this. If you can't define outcomes, then by what criteria are you going to monitor improvement? My answer is that you can't measure outcomes *and their causes* well enough to decide if the program is doing what it is supposed to. Even if you can measure the outcomes reasonably well (and often you can't), you can seldom attribute them confidently to the program. Too much else will have influenced them at the same time. However, you can usually define the ideals, roughly, well enough to derive performance indicators for them. The indicators can tell you if you're headed roughly in the right direction. And you can continue to polish the indicators over time.
Note, too, the insistence that we are here dealing with indicators, not measures. We're not trying to determine in any definitive fashion if someone is performing. We're trying to give them access to unthreatening feedback which they can use to monitor their own performance.

Indicators, not measures

The label *indicators* is well chosen, in my view. Performance indicators indicate or signal that you may or may not be on track. They don't *measure* achievement.

Suppose some indicators decline. That doesn't mean that achievement has necessarily also declined. It may have. Or it may be that something else that we don't understand has occurred. Declining indicators signal a need for research, not a need for blame.

Your experience probably informs you that people become skilful at delivering the indicators without the performance. They devise ways of defeating the feedback system. (Very possibly this isn't the way they think of what they are doing.)

Here are four strategies for dealing with this. (I think that if you have to use these you may already be in trouble.)

First, we try to cover all of the ideals with our indicators. The indicators may otherwise convey the wrong impression about the real ideals.

Second, we recognise that any one indicator may bear only a rough relationship to the ideal it signals. Packages of multiple indicators will confer some assurance that the indicators are a reasonable proxy.

Third, we monitor resource use and unintended consequences as well as intended consequences. People may otherwise achieve apparent performance by driving up associated (but unsignalled) costs and unwanted consequences.

(We also bear in mind that many of the unintended consequences may be less tangible, and less immediate.)

Fourth, the indicators are developed and used by those people whose performance is being indicated. In other words, we assume that most people would prefer to do a good job than a poor job. We give them access to the information that allows them to do so.

This is sufficient background for us to return to the topic mentioned briefly in the previous session: developing indicators.

Developing indicators

You will recall that the previous session stated, briefly, that effective indicators were an adequate sample of:

- the ideals;
- intended immediate effects;
- unintended immediate effects; and
- resource use.

I can now add: for each ideal, a package of indicators is safer than a single indicator.

For example, labour turnover is an indicator of morale. By itself, however, it isn't a very good one. It may go up or down because, say, employment levels have changed in the economy. Absenteeism is also an indicator of morale, again not a good one. It may be more sensitive to the incidence of colds and flu than the level of morale.

Use both turnover and absence, and you've improved the quality of the indicator. Add quality of goods produced, variability in productivity, and timekeeping, and you've improved it further.

It is self-evident, I think, that it's better to sample all of the ideals if you can. The result, otherwise, is to channel performance into those ideals which the performance indicators point to.

I can offer an example from academia. The number of publications in refereed journals is sometimes taken as a prime indicator of academic performance. Many academics therefore seek to achieve as many publications as possible from

each study. You might reasonably argue that the outcomes would be better if they put more of their effort into doing their research and then reporting it as economically as possible.

Now consider the three categories of indicator that I'm advising: intended effects, unintended effects, and resource use. If you omit intended effects, you're ignoring the indicators which usually point most directly to the ideals. If you omit either of the others, you make it easy for apparent performance to improve by increasing unintended effects or by consuming more resources.

Summarising so far ... We can say that the Snyder process seeks to create

> a package of indicators ...
>
> ... which adequately sample ideals, intended and unintended immediate effects, and resource use ...
>
> ... and are developed and used by those whose performance is under consideration.

So, why not use activities as indicators?

In fact, sometimes those are the only indicators that are accessible enough in the short term to be feasible. But there is a trap in their use. It assumes that there is one best way to turn resources into outcomes. In practice, different people may be able to achieve the best results in different ways.

From another perspective, it really isn't the boss's or the system's business *how* a person or a team achieves outcomes. If the desired outcomes are achieved within the resource constraints, the system has what it needs. Any other responsibility can be devolved to the individual or team.

Think of it in systems terms. The inputs (that is, the resources) and the outputs (that is, the effects and targets) affect the system. The activities, of themselves, don't. [41]

Now consider the choice of people to identify the indicators. There are actually two choices to be made here. First, who devises the indicators? Second, who uses them?

I've described the Snyder process used participatively — the stakeholders do the analysis, perhaps with guidance from a facilitator. There are obvious reasons for doing this:

- the stakeholders are often the people who have a sufficient understanding of the system; and
- there will be less resistance to the system than if it is imposed.

There is a further advantage, and to my mind a more important one. If the stakeholders devise the indicators in the first place, they are more likely to revise them if they don't work. In other words, there is a reasonable chance that the stakeholders will own the *process for developing* the indicators as well as owning the indicators themselves.

In short, there are advantages of having the indicators devised and used by the people whose performance is indicated.

(Apart from this, there are values involved. You may prefer, as I would, to involve people because it is consistent with your values to do so.)

41. There are more complex issues here, too. This isn't the place to go into them in detail. Suffice it to say that an organisation which controls people's activities is a very different kind of organisation, with very different management styles, to one which controls only inputs and outputs. Increasingly, the structures which work effectively are those which devolve as much responsibility as possible for the work to those who are doing the work. You can adopt the strategy of controlling activities in a stable environment. It works well enough then. It breaks down quickly in unstable environments.

Short-cycle evaluation and other processes

It is probably apparent from my description that the Snyder process implements many of the action research techniques that I mentioned in earlier sessions. (For that matter, I haven't described it in enough detail for you to carry it out without drawing on the earlier material.)

Notice, however, the *result* of short cycle evaluation: it sets up a feedback system which people can use to carry out an action-research-like activity thereafter. The action research doesn't stop when the Snyder is completed — the participants become action researchers of their own performance.

The result can be continuous improvement: "kaizen", as some of the quality management literature calls it. [42] In fact, you could use the Snyder process as a qualitative version of Total Quality Management or TQM.

Done participatively, it bears a strong resemblance to the form of TQM recommended by Deming. [43] Genuine responsibility is devolved to the people who carry out the activities, and they continue to manage the process.

In this regard, short cycle evaluation also serves a function similar to that of appraisal: it helps to manage performance. However, notice the differences from many performance appraisal systems. Notice especially:

- that people appraise themselves; and
- that the appraisal is of a team, not of an individual.

In these respects, to some extent it overcomes the objections to appraisal which Deming voices.

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42. Imai, M. (1986) *Kaizen: the key to Japan's competitive success*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
43. Deming, W.E. (1986) *Out of the crisis*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Centre for Advanced Engineering Study.

Archived resources

The most relevant archived resources are those already mentioned: snyder and snyder-b. These consist of two more-detailed descriptions of the process. I suggest you download and examine them before attempting the exercises below.

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder.txt

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/snyder-b.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/snyder-b.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/snyder-b.txt

Further reading

The works mentioned in the previous session are again relevant.

Activities

A thought experiment

Continue the darts experiment described on page "Darts" on page 196. You've already rated your overall job in terms of the feedback you receive. Now look separately at the components of the job. (All but the simplest jobs consist of several different tasks which can be separately analysed.)

Imagine a typical day. Identify the major activities you engage in. For each of them, give a rating on a 10-point scale, where

1 is like playing darts blindfold

10 is direct, immediate, accurate, non-threatening feedback.

What could you do to improve the feedback for the most important activities? ... for the activities where feedback is particularly poor?

An individual activity

People usually think of their work, or their social or family life, as a sequence of *activities*. Thinking of it in terms of resources and immediate effects is more difficult. Yet these are what affect others.

In the previous session you analysed a typical day in terms of the costs and benefits. Carry that analysis further: notice who bears the costs, and who enjoys the benefits. Identify the feedback that would most effectively help you to monitor the performance.

If you wished, you could even approach those people and ask them for relevant feedback. I suggest that you do your own analysis first, then check it out against their perceptions.

For your learning group

In the previous session you were invited to begin helping each other to choose a suitable project to which you could apply the Snyder process, at least in imagination. Help each other to continue that process. In turn, imagine how you might actually facilitate a complete Snyder process applied to the project of your choice.

Help each other to give particular attention to the development and use of performance indicators.

In this session, we examined in a little more detail two aspects of the Snyder process: the comparisons within the process evaluation phase, and the development and use of performance indicators. We also briefly compared the Snyder process to Total Quality Management, and to appraisal processes.

Next session we examine a different systems model: soft systems methodology. Although not usually thought of as an evaluation process, it serves that purpose very well.

As usual, speaking only for myself ...

Part of my aim in areol is to offer a pluralistic view of research generally and action research in particular. So I've been offering as a possible view that ...

- there isn't only one good way to do research
- "good" research may or may not look like action research, depending on the situation and the desired outcomes
- that good evaluation and good research can be regarded as part of the same broad package.

In like manner, the examples I've used in recent sessions imply that evaluation has a lot in common with appraisal. And I think that's true. It has been my experience that appraisal systems mostly don't work all that well. Mostly, they arouse people's defensiveness. For similar reasons I think evaluation can be hard to use well.

The goal of the Snyder process is to combine effective action with effective understanding. At best, these enhance each other rather than interfere with each other. I think that's an important point of similarity with action research. In all of this, the effective participation of members of the client group is often an important part of achieving both action and research outcomes.

Now, my questions for you ...

Is it possible to do effective evaluation participatively?

Clearly, I believe so. Many think it compromises your neutrality and objectivity.

For that matter, I could also have said: "Is it possible to do effective action research non-participatively?"

Clearly, I believe so. Many don't. The answers commonly given to these questions are often more a matter of definition or of ideology than of effectiveness, I suspect.

If you read the evaluation literature with a historical eye, though, a pattern emerges. First, evaluation was "evaluation research". The methodologies were mostly quantitative and quasi-experimental. As researchers engaged more with the complexity of what they were evaluating, it became more qualitative. The variety of methodologies increased.

More recently a move to participative evaluation can be seen.

High participation clearly requires the researcher to involve herself in the research situation. It might be argued that in doing this she sacrifices the objective stance that some evaluators believe is important. If so, what might be done to counteract this? What do you think?

Finally, not so much a question as a comment ...

It seems to me that demanding that action research is participative may close off some important options. It may make it more difficult for you to recognise how applicable the action research cycle can be to situations where participation isn't feasible.

and another one ...

Here are some thoughts on indicators and measures.

You may have noticed a tendency in some situations for people to attach undue importance to numbers. This is part of my reason for emphasising that, for me, indicators are not measures. They are indicators.

As I said in the session, a changed indicator doesn't say that performance has changed. It says that something is going on. Until we research it further it may be dangerous to read too much into it.

If too much importance is attached to indicators, it seems to me that the indicators can actually be counter-productive. For instance you can probably think of situations where indicators are treated as if they did really measure performance.

The result? The people whose performance is being measured also treat the indicators as if they were equivalent to performance. They ensure that they achieve the indicator whether they achieve performance or not. This is hardly surprising.

My question is ... What can be done about this?

Second, I have come to believe that immediate effects and vision now often deserve more attention than targets do. Many of our communities and other social systems face more rapid change than they have for some time. By the time targets are achieved the rest of the world has moved on elsewhere. The targets may no longer be appropriate.

How then can continuing improvement be achieved?

I think it helps to have an carefully-crafted vision set well enough into the future and general enough that the detail isn't going to matter. It becomes the beacon on a distant hill so that we can keep moving in an appropriate direction.

Beyond that, often the best we can see through the fog or our uncertainties are the safe next step or two. This is what the indicators allow us to monitor.

What do you think?

13 Soft systems methodology

... in which the problem-solving process known as soft systems methodology is first described, and its use as an evaluation process is considered [44]

As you read this session, think *transformation*. As you experience your day, think *transformation*. It is another way of thinking about activities: as ways of transforming inputs into outputs, information into decisions, food into meals, experience into learning, [add your own] ...

In this session:

- an overview of soft systems methodology
- a summary of the conventional 7-stage process
- an alternative description of soft systems methodology as a series of dialectics
- soft systems methodology as an evaluation methodology

44. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session13.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session13.html

The sessions immediately before this have described the Snyder process. It is a detailed process which applies action research principles to the task of evaluating a program or unit. This session examines another detailed action research process, soft systems methodology.

Soft systems methodology is a qualitative methodology developed by Peter Checkland and his colleagues at Lancaster University. It applies systems concepts to qualitative research (as does the Snyder process). It is particularly suited to the analysis of information systems. That is less of a constraint than you might imagine: most programs and units can be thought of as information systems by focusing on their decision-making.

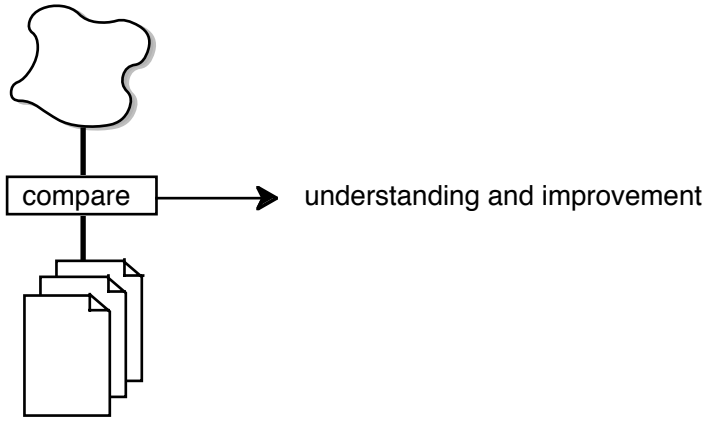
Checkland [45] has explained how it is intended to deal with complex situations while maintaining adequate standards of rigour. He also explicitly identifies it as an action research methodology. [46]

In this session I begin by describing it as Checkland does. I then offer a different description, one which relates it to some of the concepts of action research discussed in earlier sessions.

SSM briefly

At the heart of SSM is a comparison between the world as it is, and some models of the world as it might be. Out of this comparison arise a better understanding of the world ("research"), and some ideas for improvement ("action"):

45. Checkland, P. (1981) *Systems thinking, systems practice*. Chichester: Wiley.
46. Checkland, P. (1992) From framework through experience to learning: the essential nature of action research. In C.S. Bruce and A.N. Russell, Transforming tomorrow today: Proceedings of the Second World Congress on Action Learning. Brisbane: Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association. [pp1-7]
There is also a strong and explicit action research emphasis in parts of Checkland's more recent book, especially pages 18-28, and Chapter 6, of Checkland, P. and Holwell, S. (1998) *Information, systems, and information systems: making sense of the field*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.



In SSM the researchers begin with a real-world problem. They study the systems which contain the problem. Following this, they develop some models of how those systems might work better. As SSM is a systems methodology, the models are formed using systems concepts. [47] The "ideal" models are then compared to the actual situation. Differences between the models and reality become the basis for planning changes.

The description above is mainly taken from recent literature. [48] This and the earlier SSM literature also offer a 7-stage description, which follows. I use Checkland's terminology for the labels. Note that this is necessarily a brief description — you are referred to Checkland's own writing for more detail.

The 7-stage description

(I should point out that Checkland now has some misgivings about this step-by-step approach except for teaching purposes. My own view is that if it is not used

47. This may be why it has come under fire for maintaining the status quo. Similar criticisms are commonly offered to systems-based approaches generally. I don't think the criticisms are necessarily justified. It depends who you regard as the client, and how you define the goals.
48. Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. (1991) *Soft systems methodology in action*. Chichester, UK: Wiley. Also Checkland, P., and Holwell, S. (1998) *Information, systems, and information systems: making sense of the field*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

mechanistically it can serve a useful purpose. Beginners using SSM find the it helpful in getting started.)

1 The problem situation unstructured

The problem situation is first experienced, as it is, by the researcher. That is, the researcher makes as few presumptions about the nature of the situation as possible.

2 The problem situation expressed

In this step the researcher develops a detailed description, a "rich picture", of the situation within which the problem occurs. This is most often done diagrammatically.

Throughout the 7 stages, both and *logic* and the *culture* of the situation are taken into account. These twin streams of enquiry, logic and culture, are incorporated into the rich picture. Checkland puts it this way. In addition to the logic of the situation, the rich picture also tries to capture the relationships, the value judgments people make, and the "feel" of the situation.

3 Root definitions of relevant systems

Now the "root definitions", the *essence* of the relevant systems, are defined. For the logical analysis, Checkland provides the mnemonic CATWOE as a checklist for ensuring that the important features of the root definitions are included:

the **C**ustomers.....who are system beneficiaries
the **A**ctors .....who transform inputs to outputs
the **T**ransformation .....from inputs into outputs
the **W**eltanschauung .....the relevant world views
the **O**wner .....the persons with power of veto
the **E**nvironmental constraints .....that need to be considered

The *transformation* element is one of the features that signal this as a *systems* approach.

The cultural analysis has three parts:

- A role analysis, focusing on the intervention itself. This seeks to identify the client, the would-be problem solver (the researcher), and the problem owner (roughly, stakeholders). In the terms that we used in earlier sessions you could think of this as the diagnostic part of entry and contracting.
- A social system analysis. This identifies, for the problem situation, three sets of elements: roles, norms, and values.
- A political system analysis. This identifies the use of power in the problem situation.

4 Making and testing conceptual models

The researcher now draws upon her knowledge of systems concepts and models. She develops descriptions, in system terms, of how the relevant parts of the situation *might* ideally function.

One of the important questions here is: ideals from whose point of view? If you adopt those who pay you as your client, you may well just help the organisation exploit its members more effectively. If you adopt everyone in the system as a client, you will avoid this problem. But perhaps people outside the system will bear some of the cost of this. Here, as elsewhere, a careful identification of stakeholders can make a large difference to the outcomes.

5 Comparing conceptual models with reality

The purpose is not to implement the conceptual models. Rather, it is so that models and reality can be compared and contrasted. The differences can be used as the basis for a discussion: how the relevant systems work, how they might work, and what the implication of that might be.

6 Identify feasible and desirable changes

From the discussion at step 5, certain possible changes are identified. They are likely to vary in desirability and feasibility:

- desirable: is it technically an improvement?
- feasible: especially, does it fit the culture?

7 Action to improve the problem situation

The desirable and feasible changes identified at step 6 are now put into practice.

I would like now to offer a different description. My hope is to do this in such a way that the cyclic nature of the process, and the use of dialectic comparisons, are made more evident.

A different description

This is the same process being described here. It is just that I'm taking a different perspective. You can think of soft systems methodology as progressing through four dialectics. It is in such terms that I describe it below.

The first dialectic between immersion (the rich picture) and essence (the root definitions)

The researchers experience the situation as fully as possible. When they believe they understand its logic and culture well enough, they stand back and attempt to define the essential features.

The researchers may include clients as co-researchers. They alternate between immersion and essence. When immersed, they ask themselves "How well do the root definitions capture the important part of what I am experiencing?" When

defining the essence they ask "How well is the reality represented in the root definitions I am writing?"

Eventually the comparison is satisfactory. The root definitions do capture the essential features of the situation, as far as they can tell.

(I suggest to novices that they use CATWOE, but begin with transformations. What resources are transformed into what outcomes by the part of the situation they are studying? Checkland's CATWOE mnemonic then serves as a check that they have adequately covered the various features.

(This may seem a little mechanical. In practice, Checkland makes clear the importance of considering cultural, social and political systems in the analysis. I agree.

(In addition, you might also want to give deep consideration to the stakeholders: Who will you involve? To what extent?)

The second dialectic between the essence (the root definitions) and the ideals (the conceptual models)

The researchers now put the rich picture out of mind. They work from the essential description to devise an ideal way (preferably several such ways) of achieving the same transformations of inputs into outputs. In doing this, they try not to be influenced by the details of the actual situation. This might blind them to more effective and creative ways of achieving the transformations.

As before, they now alternate between the two perspectives. Do the ideals achieve all of the transformations captured in the root definitions? Considered from the perspective of the ideals, do the root definitions appear to be complete? At this point, the researchers may choose to go back to the first alternation. As Checkland argues strongly, it isn't intended to be a one-way process. It can return on itself as often as the need arises.

This alternation, too, continues until the researchers are satisfied with the ideals they have developed.

The third dialectic between ideals (conceptual models) and reality

It is now apparent that the root definitions allow the researchers to distance themselves from reality. As they alternate between the ideals and that reality they have a richer dialectic to work with. Compare ideals to reality, and the differences become apparent. These differences may suggest improvements to the ideals or to the actual situation.

Sometimes, researchers will discover important features in the situation which are not included in the ideals. This implies that revision of the conceptual models is warranted. (On occasion this may require revisiting the earlier alternations.) More often, some features of the conceptual models will be found to be a technical improvement over those found in the actual situation, and culturally appropriate. These are recorded as changes to be implemented.

For each of these changes, action plans are developed. The action planning process archived as "etrack" could be used for this purpose. It has the advantage that it builds monitoring activities into the plans, to check that they are working.

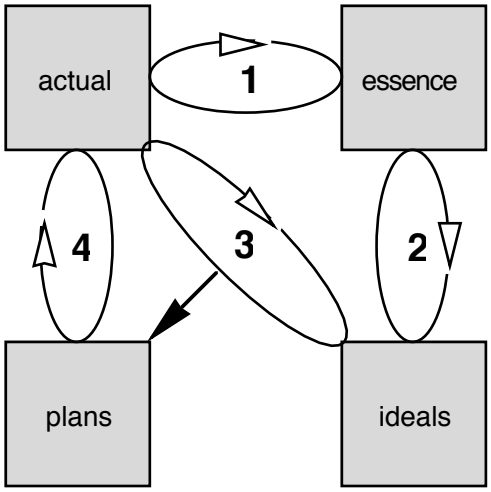
http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/etrack.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/etrack.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/etrack

The fourth dialectic between plans and implementation

When plans are implemented, the implementers soon discover how well the plans match the reality. Provided there is monitoring included in the plans, progress can be checked.

A mismatch can have several sources. It may merely point out a gap in the planning. Alternatively, the conceptual models may be at fault, or the root definitions may be lacking. This is a sign to move back to the appropriate stage of the overall process.

You might summarise the overall process graphically, like this:



the four dialectics

I would draw your attention to a number of features of the process just described:

- It uses both a process, and the theoretical concepts known as systems thinking. You could substitute a different conceptual base — a different set of concepts — if you wished. For example, you could substitute different systems models, or even non-systems models.
- It contains multiple cycles within multiple cycles. Each cycle is in some sense a test of the researchers' conceptions of the situation. The implementation phase provides the final test.
- As described above, it says more about the research than about the action. All of the issues discussed in earlier sessions are relevant, especially those related to relationships and participation.

> As far as can be judged from the literature, soft systems methodology is often used with low to moderate levels of participation. Often, it seems, the people in the system are involved primarily as informants. However, it can be used easily and effectively with very high levels of participation.

Soft systems methodology is also primarily used for problem solving, or for system improvement. The second of these uses implies that it can be used for process evaluation. And, indeed, it can.

Soft systems methodology for evaluation

Soft systems methodology serves well as a process for process evaluation. You need to make only minor changes to the process to use it for this purpose.

In normal use, you begin by identifying the problem. Then you choose a situation which is large enough to contain the problem. In using soft systems methodology for evaluation, a program or project or unit (and enough of its immediate environment) becomes the situation evaluated. You can include the environment easily by making an appropriate choice of stakeholders.

In other respects, you can follow the same process described earlier in this session.

Archived resources

There is a file in the areol archive, sofsys2.

> http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/sofsys2.html
> http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/sofsys2.html
> ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/sofsys2.txt

Other reading

Checkland's own writing is clear and well argued. Of those listed below the first of them provides a solid rationale for using systems-based and qualitative methodologies. The second provides more hands-on detail, and a stronger emphasis on the cultural analysis. The third and fourth provide some insight into more recent thinking.

Checkland, P. (1981) *Systems thinking, systems practice*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Checkland, P., and Scholes, J. (1991) *Soft systems methodology in action*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Checkland, P., and Holwell, S. (1998) *Information, systems, and information systems: making sense of the field*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Checkland, P. (1999) Soft systems methodology: a 30-year retrospective. Issued as a preface to Checkland, P., and Scholes, J., *Soft systems methodology in action*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.

A detailed case study is described by Lynda Davies and Paul Ledington.

Davies, L. and Ledington, P. (1991) *Information in action: soft systems methodology*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan.

As the title implies, it is a study of an information system. The discussion also provides some insights into the political dimensions of field research.

Most of the descriptions of the methodology say more about the overall process than about the fine-grain methods which it uses. A book which is written from a practitioner's viewpoint, and which does go into some detail is:

Patching, D. (1990) *Practical soft systems analysis*. London: Pitman.

Activities

A thought experiment:

CATWOE is a useful checklist. If you are familiar with it, you can use it to gain a wider perspective on some of your actions. Its heart is the "transformation".

For a thought experiment, you might choose a problematic situation you find yourself in as a researcher. (Choose something trivially problematic if this is your first experience of soft systems methodology). Identify the transformation achieved. What are you (or the system) doing? What resources are you trying to turn into which outcomes? How might you handle the situation differently?

An individual activity:

Repeat the thought experiment above, but on a larger situation and in more detail.

1 Choose a situation you would like to understand better.

2 List the activities which are carried out in the situation.

3 For each activity list the resources consumed, and the outcomes desired. You can do this as a 3-column exercise — resources; activities; outcomes.

4 Use the CATWOE checklist to ensure that you have adequately considered the view of consumers, actors, and owner, and that you've taken the culture and the constraints into account. Check that you have included in this the culture and politics of the situation.

5 Erase the middle column. Devise better ways, more satisfying to the stake-holders and yourself, for turning the inputs into outputs: for achieving those outcomes within the same resource constraints.

6 Consider how you might implement the improvements suggested by step 5.

For your learning group:

As with the Snyder process, imagine facilitating a soft systems process for some clients. Do this individually, noting the points at which you have trouble imagining it. Then, in your learning group, help each other flesh out the difficult bits.

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In this session I've given a very brief description of soft systems methodology, both as Checkland provides it, and a version which emphasises the cyclic nature. I've mentioned that the earlier sessions on participation on action research can be applied to soft systems methodology. I've suggested that you might also regard it as an evaluation process.

This brings us near the end of the areol program. In the next session I provide some suggestions for next steps, and seek your reactions to the program as a whole.

14 Where now?

... in which some useful references for further reading and thinking are given, and we say our farewells [49]

What are the opportunities *you* have to improve your practice through critical reflection guided by data?

This session brings areol to a close. Where now?

Perhaps there are some formal courses you could enrol in. Check with the university near you. The sorts of faculties which are most likely to offer such courses are: education, agriculture, business, nursing, and perhaps those associated with community work.

Increasingly, it's becoming possible to do higher degrees using action research. This is worth checking, too. You might start with a look at Ian Hughes' "Action Research on Web" at

http://www.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/

49. A web version of this file is available at http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/areol/areol-session14.html and http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/areol/areol-session14.html

Investigate some of the other varieties of action research. Each of them has its advantages and disadvantages. Each pays most attention to a slightly different set of factors. I think there is benefit in being familiar with several approaches. Then make up your own mind about what suits you and the situations you work in.

There are a variety of action-research-like processes in use in agricultural extension and rural development.

Chamala, S. and Mortiss, P.D. (1990) *Working together for landcare: group management skills and strategies*. Brisbane: Australian Academic Press.

Anything by Bob Chambers is likely to be relevant, either his earlier work on Rapid Rural Appraisal or the later "Farmer first" approach:

Chambers, R. (1981) Rapid rural appraisal: rationale and repertoire. *Public Administration and Development*, 1, 95-106.

Chambers, R., Pacey, A., and Thrupp, L.A., eds. (1989) *Farmer first: farmer innovation and agricultural research*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Chris Argyris is worth a special mention. Any of his recent work is relevant. The book which best captures the details of his methodology is this one:

Argyris, C., Putnam, R. and Smith, D.McL. (1985) *Action science: concepts, methods and skills for research and intervention*. San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass.

His fairly recent book with Don Schon integrates a lot of earlier material:

Argyris, C., and Schon, D.A. (1996) *Organisational learning II: theory, method and practice*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

And he has a couple of more recent books published:

Argyris, C. (1999) *On organizational learning*, second edition. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Argyris, C. (2000) *Flawed advice and the management trap: how managers can know when they're getting good advice and when they're not*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Viviane Robinson has used, and reported on, a variation of action science which is simpler and easier to understand, and beautifully described:

Robinson, V. (1993) *Problem-based methodology: research for the improvement of practice*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Peter Checkland makes the action research orientation of his soft systems methodology more apparent in a recent book:

Checkland, P. & Holwell, S. (1998) *Information, systems, and information systems: making sense of the field*. Chichester: Wiley.

The action research literature has truly blossomed in the past couple of years. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury have edited a large and valuable collection of papers:

Reason, P., and Bradbury, H. (2001) *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage.

They are also about to start up a journal, *Action research*, to be published by Sage.

And, as just one example from the recent flood, David Coghlan and Teresa Brannick have written a nice combination of action research and organisation development:

Coghlan, David, and Brannick, Teresa (2001) *Doing research in your own organization*. London: Sage.

There are other related approaches. A good starting point is Peter Reason's collection of papers:

Reason, P., ed. (1988) *Human inquiry in action: developments in new paradigm research*. Newbury Park: Sage.

And of course there are many more. Explore your local library. You may find you can access it from your home computer.

Check *Educational action research*, a Triangle journal. As its name implies, the focus is educational research. For a journal with more of an emphasis on corporate and community work check out *Concepts and transformations*, a Benjamin journal.

A journal with a "systems" orientation is *Systemic Practice and Action Research* (SPAR), a Kluwer journal.

Electronic resources

From time to time I've mentioned files on the Southern Cross action research site. There are other files there that I haven't mentioned. Most of them are associated with action research. If you haven't already browsed through them, you might consider doing so. I suggest you go in through the front page

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arhome.html

In that way you'll also have a chance to browse some of the other links and resources. You can also enter via the index of papers at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/arphome.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/arphome.html

There is now a bibliography of recent books on action research and related topics at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/books.html

http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/books.html

Other sites to try:

CARN, the Collaborative Action Research Network

http://www.uea.ac.uk/menu/acad_depts/care/carn/welcome.html

CARE, an educational action research network at the University of East Anglia

http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/

Judy Norris' qualitative research resources at the Ontario Institute

http://www.ualberta.ca/jnorris/qual.html

A collection of action research resources at the Denver campus of the University of Colorado

http://www.cudenver.edu/mryder/itc/act_res.html

Material at Queens University

http://educ.queensu.ca/projects/action_research/queensar.htm

"Networks", an on line journal for teacher research

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ctd/networks/links.html

Jack Whitehead's home page, with several educational action research theses included in full

http://www.bath.ac.uk/edsajw

I've already mentioned Ian Hughes' AROW ("Action research on web") course at Sydney

http://www.cchs.usyd.edu.au/arow/

(Let me know your own favourites, and I'll add them to this list next edition.)

Mailing lists

Many of you already subscribe to arlist-l, the action research mailing list. Others of you may consider doing so. Here are some other action research lists. To subscribe to these send the message

subscribe <listname> <yourfirstname> <yourlastname>
e.g. subscribe arlist-l Betty Rubble

to the following addresses

arlist-l	listproc@scu.edu.au
actlist-l	listproc@scu.edu.au
armnet-l	listproc@scu.edu.au
xtar	listserv@lester.appstate.edu
eqrn-l	listserv@vm.cc.purdue.edu

For the next one, don't include your name:

aelaction	majordomo@aelliot.ael.org

Those are "ells" after the hyphens, not "ones".

Arlist-l is a multi-disciplinary action research list which carries general discussions about action research. Armnet-l is a companion list for more specialised aspects of action research methodology. Actlist is multidisciplinary, with some emphasis on corporate applications; it deals with action learning and action science as well as action research.

Aelaction and xtar carry mostly educational action research discussion. Eqrn-l is very low volume, but carries a range of material.

There are also various lists on evaluation. Some which may carry information on qualitative evaluation include:

evalinfo	listserv@asuvm.inre.asu.edu

evaltalk	listserv@ua1vm.ua.edu
evalten	listserv@sjuvm.stjohns.edu
govteval	majordomo@nasionet.net

Books

In addition to the file books already mentioned above, there are a number of bibliographies on the archive. Here are some files which are either bibliographies or contain useful reference lists, with brief descriptions. They can be accessed at

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/filename.html
http://www.uq.net.au/action_research/arp/filename.html
ftp://ftp.scu.edu.au/www/arr/filename.txt

substituting the real filename for "filename".

al-biblio. A bibliography on action learning, compiled by Shankar Sankaran

biblio. An annotated bibliography on action research, including also some references on other qualitative research, and some evaluation

books. A partly-annotated bibliography of action research and related books published since 1994

meta-eval-bib. A bibliography on meta-evaluation, arranged by category, compiled by Patricia Rogers

trdbooks. A list of books, compiled by Marcia Conner, recommended by members of the trdev-l (training and development) list as their favourite books

With the resurgence of interest in action research, new books appear with increasing frequency and in a variety of disciplines. Some of the on line bookstores have "alert" services which notify you of recent books on topics you nominate.

Apart from that, you might even consider subscribing to the next on line areol program. I offer it twice a year beginning in mid February and late July. Drop me an email at bd@uq.net.au.

It's been pleasant travelling with you. Bon voyage as you continue your action research travels.