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Chapter 15
The Practice and Politics of Living Inquiry
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Speaking from Inquiry and Action Research

In this contribution I use the generic term ‘inquiry’, and locate my approach in a framing of action research. With Action Learning, these are amongst the family of action modalities depicted by Raelin (Chapter 30, in this volume) which have many similarities in terms of values and processes, but also nuanced differences (see also Pedler and Burgoyne 2008). The sections in this chapter: consider how to speak from inquiry; depict my practice; outline action research; advocate the importance of discussing issues of how we know the world; review ways to judge the value of action research; and consider how academic forms can devalue more action-oriented approaches. This exploration is set against current challenges of environmental sustainability and social justice, and their urgency. Reflecting on how to assess the value of what we do is therefore important political work. I will speak from my life, accepting the editor’s invitation to do so. This turns my voice more to advocacy, I discover, intending to be in the service of inquiry.

Trying to talk about action research or, inquiry more generally, is like trying to describe a Möbius strip, which appears as a three-dimensional figure of eight (for example in drawings by M.C. Escher), and as the eye follows round, the surface is continuous, turning back on itself, and giving the impression of an optical illusion. Because of this elusive quality, whatever I write about inquiry seems not quite to be in a commensurate plane of attention, connects fleetingly and then slips passed what I am seeking to portray, or to invoke. This means that any phrases I reach for soon seem unhelpful. For example, I was about to say that writing about inquiry makes what is multidimensional into something two-dimensional. But, of course, we have chosen often to frame experience as divided into intellect, practice, emotions, embodiment and more (all things too, not processes), creating these supposed dimensions, so I could just be trying to patch back together what has been inappropriately split apart.

I am therefore relying on my assumption that you, the reader, know what I am seeking to talk about, that you have experiences and frameworks that relate, whatever you call these. There will be much variety in terms. It may be Action Learning, action research, reflexive qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), practical reflexivity (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith 2004), meditation, self-study, some version of total quality management process awareness, or auto-ethnography. All can be adopted as ways of living, relating and working through questioning and reflexivity. You may well have developed the crafts of this practice over many years. But I am assuming, again, that the learning carries on, not always or often linear, but snaking and turning, doubling back, and sometimes seeming to switch levels, so that what was a frame of view becomes encompassed in a wider frame (Bateson 1973; Rooke and Torbert 2005).

Seeking the voice in which I can write this piece, I am circling these matters, because issues of how we know the world are highly political and currently need urgent attention, and courage to go against the grain of what is apparently acceptable.

I am not seeking to be aggressive towards or dismiss other people's points of view. I respect multiple perspectives. But there are fault lines in my positioning here, which it is best I point to myself. I find it hard to respect a positivist point of view held as if it is *the* truth or

intrinsically superior – a positioning that comes rather readily perhaps. And I am concerned about the immense harm that this is doing. I resonate with Berman's declaration:

How things are held in the mind is infinitely more important than *what* is in the mind, including this statement itself.
(Berman 1989: 312)

(Berman had been exploring Bateson's epistemology, including his notions of levels of learning, in the service of developing a metaphysics for the 'reenchantment of the world'.)

Can I take an inclusive approach, not rejecting positivism, but appreciating it as a potential choice of approach, reflexively taken? I can. And I wonder if such an approach can be reciprocated without devaluing what I am seeking to offer.

The debates of paradigm or worldview I am raising are by no means novel, and they are expressed in many realms. Giacalone and Thompson (2006), for example, argue that ethics cannot be taught in Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programmes because the latter are grounded in the organization-centered worldview prevalent in management education, and ethics must therefore be justified against predominant values of materialism and self-interest. Ethics cannot make sense in these terms, will always be eroded, simplified, interpreted through a 'business case'. 'At worst, by perpetuating a worldview prescriptively that may be damaging... we are responsible for the academic equivalent of iatrogenic (physician-induced) disease ... it is likely we have failed our students, engendering what Mitchell and Scott (1990) label an ethic of personal advantage' (Giacalone and Thompson 2006: 267). They argue for moving instead to a human-centred worldview and curriculum.

But I jump ahead of myself.

In a first iteration of this piece I did speak, rather than write. I was on a panel of three exploring the Conference theme 'Action Learning: Assessing the Value' at the Action Learning Conference at Henley Management College in March 2010. I spoke from handwritten notes I had stayed up late the night before to finalize, melding ideas I had taken with me, which seemed inevitable things for me to say, with what had arisen from experiencing the conference so far. What I said, and how, was thus tailored to that time and context. In that immediacy, it seemed possible to make what I was saying conditional, provisional, unfinished; and to leave it questioning in the air, inviting others to respond. And yet it seemed rooted in a form of 'truth' about which I care greatly and was trying to tell in that moment and context. So I locate this writing in that experience, and am seeking to recreate its provisional qualities here.

Outlining my Practices of Inquiry

I will next explore how I have found inquiry helpful in terms of my own practice and to offer other people I work with, for example participants on programmes we run.

For me, inquiry is a potential life approach, a way of being. I have used the phrase *living life as inquiry* to depict this (Marshall 1999), describing it, imperfectly, as:

A range of beliefs, strategies and ways of behaving which encourage me to treat little as fixed, finished, clear-cut. Rather I have an image of living continually in process, adjusting, seeing what emerges, bringing things into question... attempting to

open to continual question what I know, feel, do and want, and finding ways to engage actively in this questioning and process its stages.

(Marshall 1999: 156–157)

It also means seeking to pay attention to the ‘stories’ I tell about myself and the world, such as this one, recognizing that these are all constructions, influenced by my purposes and perspectives and by social discourses which inform meanings and values.

One image I have is of continually, simultaneously, weaving between inner and outer arcs of attention (Marshall 2001), moving round the Möbius strip, as I seek to reflect and act fluidly in context, and to 'maintain curiosity... about what is happening and what part I am playing in creating and sustaining patterns of action, interaction and non-action' (Marshall 1999: 157).

This is not a claim for some sort of reflexive perfection, but expresses a sense of continual quest, seeking to be aware of choices, to hear beyond my own echo; and often encountering limits, disturbances, stumbles, discomforts, when I learn in and from experiencing the choppy waters. It means living on an edge between discipline and emergence. It is, then, an aspiration.

Inquiry of this kind can be micro-practice, in the moment, as Bill Torbert’s notion of action inquiry shows well (Fisher et al. 2001), and more broadly oriented, continually checking in with questions of what is worthwhile and how what I am doing meets my senses of purpose. One such question, for me, is ‘what is writing for?’ Looking to current world challenges and rules of (UK) academia, these provide dissonant expectations. An issue I return to below.

Action research as inquiry is, then, my ever-provisional attempt to act with integrity in a complex, largely unknowable, often highly political world.

Dimensions of Action Research

Stepping back a little, action research is a term applied to a richly diverse range of approaches. There have been recent attempts to map these, their foundations and current manifestations, for example in handbooks by Reason and Bradbury (2001; 2008) and Cooke and Wolfram Cox (2005). Within action research’s variety we can depict approaches as incorporating first, second and third person dimensions, often all in combination (Reason and Torbert 2001).

First person action research involves a person adopting an inquiring approach to their own assumptions, perspectives and action, seeking to behave awarely and choicefully in a given context, and to develop their practice in some way. An example would be someone repeatedly experimenting with how far they can go in challenging their organization to put sustainability at the heart of its strategy before they are considered an irritant and ripe for early retirement.

Living life as inquiry fits under this heading, initially. Some form of self-reflection is, I suggest, foundational to any action we take in the world, as well as a mode of learning, delight and stimulating challenge. Some people see the inward-directed aspect of first person inquiry as potentially self-indulgent; and it can be. But it is also, in my view, a responsibility. First person inquiry reaches towards wider impact, working with the question ‘to what purpose?’ And, as those adopting disciplines of auto-ethnography show, the political is opened through working critically with the personal (Sparkes 2002).

Second person action research is when people come together to inquire into issues of mutual interest. There may be an initiating researcher, but their intention is to help create a community in which all join in decisionmaking about inquiry processes as well as the content of the research and action. The European–American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2005) provides a powerful example. Members’ self-reflective practice is greatly enhanced by telling stories about their experiences around issues of race, and being supported to challenge their assumptions and patterns of behaviour by critical friends in their inquiry group.

Third person action research tries to promote sustained, engaged inquiry in a wider community of some kind, perhaps an organization or a geographic region (Gustavsen 2001). The Carbon Disclosure Project (n.d.) is an organization taking on this role. Backed by extensive investor interests, it asks organizations to declare their carbon use, and publicizes this information, to encourage transparency and discussion internationally.

In working with action research we can use appropriate quality processes, not pale versions of scientific method.

My approach to action research is strongly informed by systemic thinking, a sense of acting embedded in complex systemic patterns, to which I contribute. We might create provisional boundaries – notions of person, of organization – but need to know that these are also constructions. And whilst we cannot control, or disentangle, we can also seek to act, reflexively, in complex, shifting worlds. Dunphy et al. (2007), considering change for environmental sustainability, point to the challenges of balancing a sense of agency with suitable humility as we seek to be influential and yet sensitive to the world around us:

As change agents and change leaders, we are only one source of influence in a complex changing reality. Nevertheless, let us not underestimate the potential transformative power that we represent... Change leadership involves owning our own power and using it responsively and responsibly (Dunphy et al. 2007:322).

Seeking to live systemic thinking in practice (Marshall 2004) means I aspire to contextual sensitivity. This might mean wanting to fit in, be timely, attuned. But it is not about being over-shaped and conforming. In giving a presentation, for example, I seek to be there, in place and time, tailoring what I say to the audience. But simultaneously I want to work at edges and boundaries, noticing if something seems inappropriate to say, and looking into that assumption, interpretation. Sometimes that means I will challenge myself to say it, whatever the apparent consequences, and at other times I will keep my peace, and think that was appropriate (scrutinizing what appropriate means from different perspectives).

On courses I *offer* people action research, inquiry, as a soft discipline for dangerous times, a way to question framings and purposes, to link knowing and practice in ever-open loops. And, I have to live inquiry to put it on offer. I have no set idea of what course participants take it to be. I and my colleagues push people to explore, to make it anew for themselves (Marshall et al. 2011). They are ‘forced’ by course requirements to develop action research practice of some kind, to do *something*. We offer critical educational forms with potential qualities of ‘liberating structures’ (Torbert 1991).

Here I offer two stories of inquiry in action to give texture to what inspires me about it as a potential life practice for challenging times.

Story 1: We create a development course and Action Learning stream on the MBA. The course participants are a little wary. They ask whether (just) going through repeated cycles of action and reflection can really be helpful. They do personal development plans – rows and

columns – but these seem somewhat static, with readily expected words and phrases. The assessment process aligns with the potential learning process, leading us all forward. This person has been in a technical professional a long time. It sounds complex work, getting the technical right and also negotiating and integrating the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders. He's given himself a year off. He takes to the learning process with commitment, not necessarily trusting or distrusting it, simply doing it, reading lots, exploring. The learning soon comes alive. One outcome is that he appreciates the *nature* of the kinds of goals he set himself at the start of the MBA, and he had previously set himself in his life, and sees the potential limitations, for him now. He becomes an avidly self-referenced learner. This change of form is interesting. Any evaluation questions based on 'did you achieve what you set out to achieve?' become redundant, inappropriate.

Story 2: I am sitting with a learning set near the end of a two-year, part-time Masters programme. They have worked together throughout, partly self-managed, partly with me alongside. It has not been that easy; trust has been tenuous at times. They are giving each other feedback on their draft dissertations. I joined them with my notes in hand. They greeted me pleasantly enough, but carried on. Their feedback is critical, incisive, and yet supportive of each person's potential learning. There is a directness of tone, and of appraisal of the work as it stands. I am superfluous. I sit back comfortably. I can contribute, but the learning is not reliant on me. And my contributions will also be met with supportive scrutiny.

Why is All This Important Right Now?

These issues matter intensely now because we are complicit in a radical reduction of the diversity of life on earth, we are living beyond the earth's carrying capacity, and those of us in the affluent world (wherever located) are doing this at the expense of our fellow global citizens. This is the world against which our work, and daily practice, should be referenced and judged. These are issues of epistemology, of how we know the world, and what relation we take to that knowing. I see action research as offering a range of forms of knowing and practice for living in messy, complex, dangerous situations. Current challenges of sustainability and social justice are dangerous, complex and urgent.

In relation to current academic, and thus educational, forms, Orr (1994) critiques how they, inter alia, divide the world by academic discipline, advocate domination over nature, promote individualism and rights rather than citizenship and responsibility and separate rationality from feeling and valuing. On these bases, and by no means alone, he suggests they are part of, contributory to, our ecological problems:

The crisis we face is first and foremost one of mind, perceptions, and values; hence, it is a challenge to those institutions presuming to shape minds, perceptions, and values. It is an educational challenge. More of the same kind of education can only make things worse.

(Orr 1994: 27)

Similarly, more of the same kind of narrow-banded knowledge systems which underpin much current academia will only make things worse. Whilst there are counter-movements to what may be referred to for shorthand as 'dominant ways of thinking', there are also significant trends to overpower, subvert or co-opt ways of knowing with more radical potential. The action modalities (Raelin, Chapter 30 in this volume) are counter-movements, and so are engaged in important political work.

I have a history of exploring topics that might be excluded, be seen as 'alternative' – including managerial job stress, the experiences of women in management, action research and issues of sustainability. Repeated themes in my work have therefore been: advocating that we value multiple ways of knowing to access more of our human intelligence; and wanting people as citizens to have a sense of agency and the capacities to shape and influence their organizations, communities and lives.

Action research, and foundational practices of inquiry, are key resources as I seek to live my life this way. In developing inquiry as a life practice, I align then with people who are seeking to make contributions to a more environmentally sustainable and socially just world. I see them (us) as self-appointed change agents to organizations, society and the planet. I identify with, these intentions, cautious about their potential arrogance. Meyerson and Scully (1995) coined the term 'tempered radicals' for inside-outsiders trying to influence change. Elsewhere, I and a colleague have mapped practices and choices of those enacting 'responsible careers' (Tams and Marshall 2011).

How Can We Judge the Value of Inquiry?

There are several strands I wish to pursue here. The first is that inquiry invites, or forces, me to open up questions of framing. In my own practice, it helps me engage in framing, critiquing framing and reframing. It also opens up perspectives and fundamental processes for collaborative negotiation with others. Although I must also recognize that framing is an ever-recessive process and we cannot ultimately see behind our own constructing of the world.

These issues of framing apply to the question of assessing value itself. We need to ask: What is valuable? What is effective? Where do we look in a world of radical complexity to assess value? I am not expecting linear cause-effect answers. I am seeking to appreciate 'things' (created as they are by my processes of perception) in context, and to recognize how I punctuate the world (Bateson 1973) as active choice, amenable to some reflection.

What is valuable or effective are questions to treat as inquiry, potentially open-ended, iterative inquiry. I need to choose the criteria against which to assess what I am doing, in the moment and more generally. I can open these criteria to radical debate, and feedback from critical friends. I ask myself, too, what and who I answer to. In addition to the more obvious possibilities, this includes the river Dart in Devon and its surrounding woodland, for example. What would they 'say' of my endeavours, I wonder?

Am I expecting to see organizational change from my or course participants' efforts? Perhaps. Will it be nicely ordered change? That is less likely. Might it become messy and chaotic? Quite possibly. And how will I know whether what happens is 'good' or 'bad'? Sometimes it seems, from a systemic perspective, that 'letting' things fall apart that I have given a lot of energy to holding is the better thing. It releases energy. A new pattern of order may emerge. But often what ensues is uncomfortable, scary, has to be lived as inquiry. And it is especially challenging if others' lives are affected. Alternatively, change that initially seemed promising can disappoint. It can be undermined, subverted, conventionalized; whilst new language is used, terms that seemed to show radical promise can be co-opted. I may have put my energies into what later seems somewhat futile. But I may provisionally choose to continue doing so, if change might be possible. One of my key dilemmas is, then, 'knowing when to persist and when to desist' (Marshall 1999: 165).

From a systemic viewpoint, actively or inadvertently unsettling things may be very 'useful', opening space for new order to arise, especially if previously muted voices and perspectives can then be enabled to contribute, and dominant group members be enabled to

listen. Anita Roddick used to quote Gloria Steinem as having said, 'If I come here today and there's no trouble tomorrow, I haven't done my job.' Anita took her role as provocateur very seriously. I resonate with this possibility. But, again, there is always choice, this does not have to be compulsive.

One of the measures of value I use for assessing inquiry is whether it offers people capacities and processes, and a sense of agency and desire, to work with questions of how to frame and assess value for themselves, through their own practice and developing knowing. This is a key question, highly political, seldom able to be resolved, and so a question to be treated continually as living inquiry. Choosing criteria and reference groups against which to assess value are political acts.

It has been challenging to write this contribution. There are several reasons. One is that as soon as I try to say this sort of 'stuff' it turns into pretentious nonsense, apparently raging ambition, trivia inflated to consequence, flagrantly un-lived aspiration. There are too many sentences starting with 'I'. It is as if I am trying to make a big thing out of carrying on breathing, am romanticizing, dramatizing, simply being alive.

And it is important to acknowledge and represent the shadow sides of inquiry. Whilst it can be fun at times, seeking to live 'continually in process' (Marshall 1999:156) and so on, action research contributes to a more unsettled, disturbing world too. Being more self-reflective can be an uncomfortable way to live, edgy. The introspection some people interpret it to involve can swamp them, they can become too self-absorbed, unable simultaneously to move outwards. Recognizing multiple perspectives and engaging in framing and reframing can leave people 'radically unanchored in any particular, taken-for-granted frame' (Torbert 1987: 144).

And, yet, if I, we, can do 'it' easily, we are acting out of habit, established practice – then it is not a learning edge and loses its radical potential.

Knowing, Voice and Academic Form

Raising issues of how we assess value is, I think, challenging for those currently associated in some way with academia in the UK. Regimes of knowing are becoming more constrained; systems of assessment and surveillance are developing their scope and impact. In seeming defiance of the urgency of addressing significant global challenges such as climate change, academia in the UK has a major self-obsession, consuming much energy. I am bemused about this. Again, it seems an epistemological matter, and highly political, that might relate to producing this book.

UK universities are now experiencing (actively self-imposing) some retrenchment into traditional forms of 'scientific' knowledge. The RAEs (Research Assessment Exercises), now become the REF (Research Excellence Framework), ask us to publish in top international journals to show the value of our work, and to track our impact through citations. International often means from the United States of America; journals of the Academy of Management, for example. US academia favours more positivist notions of science, quantitative methods and value neutrality. These characteristics come to define 'high-quality' work. Elite groups form through academic processes. Centres and peripheries take shape, in more radical and critical circles as well as in the supposed mainstream. Journals are rated 1 to 4 star. We are told where we must publish, what is prestigious and so on. 'Practitioner' journals will not count on this listing, nor do books really.

Discussing academic writing feels like uncovering the layerings of internalized oppression. I encounter the disparaged, coveted, deadening, enticing norms of appropriate voice

and behaviour. They seem to me to represent a massive lack of academic courage; transfixed by rating scales.

One of the more amusing (perhaps) manifestations is the futility of much academic work, the clamour when we were asked to talk about ‘impact’ for the next cycle of REF assessment, as if it was unfair, the debates about what ‘impact’ means. Building impact back in is also derisory, potentially futile, given the consistent ‘training’ of the last years to distance ourselves from practice. But perhaps it will become only academic impact, how many fellow, similarly challenged, academics have cited a paper.

These are matters of paradigm, of what genres of knowing are valued in the world, given privilege, and allowed to take superiority over others. These concerns lead me to question what has been taken as ‘science’, and how scientific data can then be allowed to drive out other ways of knowing, including action-oriented approaches. I am concerned about whose voices are included, excluded, subordinated and co-opted in these processes. As an older academic, I can have my independent view on these matters, but I feel for my younger colleagues, and regret their potentially wasted energies.

Closing Reflection

Is a living practice of inquiry set within a framing of action research an appropriate approach to learning in this time of unsustainability in terms of the earth’s carrying capacity? Or do we need committed sure people who think they know the way out of here? I feel compelled to ask this question, but the latter option is not appealing. These people are busy already, for example offering technological fixes, and doing much that is also valuable. But they risk unwittingly replicating business-as-usual and our damaged ways of knowing in new guises, or having their efforts co-opted. I look to inquiry and action modalities to offer us processes for seeing through current hierarchies of power and valuing, listening to diversity and the more-than-human world, continually checking against purposes, and experimenting and reviewing as we go along together.

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