The Politics of Action Research

The Politics of Action Research:

A Storytelling Inquiry

By

Geof Hill and Andrew Rixon

Foreword by Bob Dick

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Politics of Action Research: A Storytelling Inquiry

By Geof Hill and Andrew Rixon

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-0364-1650-8
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-1651-5

If you've been told that action researching is non-political, it's time to think again. Politics and power are everywhere in our multicoloured postmodern world. The stories in this book help us reimagine political power away from conventional dominance and conformity toward plural voiced, participative transformations. Read it, then join in with the spirit of transformative co-creativity that help transformations happen in response to the planetary crisis
—Hilary Bradbury – Editor-in-Chief *Action Research Journal*

Both accessible and cogently argued, this wide-ranging exploration of the promise and politics of action research will assist anyone trying to navigate the complexities of this vibrant and life-enhancing methodology, whether as student, practitioner, or seasoned academic. Colleagues and friends will have to buy their own copies as mine will be kept firmly in my back pocket!
—Geoff Mead, PhD. – Associate Professor of Narrative Leadership Hult International Business School.

The Politics of Action Research reinforces a crucial message for all engaged in transformative work: our methods, our choices, and our presence as researchers inevitably shape the systems we study. By embracing this reality and striving for responsible, reflexive practice, we open new possibilities for meaningful change and deeper understanding.
—Michael Lissack, – Director, Second Order Science Foundation

Understanding story-telling as provenance of action research is a welcome contribution that these authors bring to the field.
—David Coghlan, Ph.D., FTCD, – Professor Emeritus and Fellow Emeritus at the Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword ix

Chapter 1 1
Introduction

Chapter 2 18
Methodology: Storytelling as inquiry

Chapter 3 30
Ethics

Chapter 4 37
Provenance

Chapter 5 45
The nature of political discourse

Chapter 6 54
Illuminating storytelling as inquiry

Chapter 7 62
Stories about silencing

Chapter 8 69
Stories about empowering

Chapter 9 83
Stories about the gatekeepers

Chapter 10 92
Stories about multiple pathways or pathways through the swamp

Chapter 11 100
Stories about meaning shifts

Chapter 12 105
The future of action research

Chapter 13 113
Conclusion

References 119

Index 136

FOREWORD:
ACTION RESEARCH AND POLITICS

BOB DICK

When Andrew Rixon and Geof Hill invited me to write a Foreword for this book I was enthusiastic. Both of them are good practitioners, good academics, and good colleagues. Action research has long been a core interest of mine.

As a focus of this Foreword, they suggested *action research and politics*.

I experienced a moment of disquiet. For me, the word *political* conjured up a vision of destructive and competitive debate, as between political parties. In the past I have instead thought of action research as apolitical. The processes and skills I use in my action research help to remove the politics, as often defined. On further reflection I thought of another perspective — that action research does deal with politics, and in several important respects. It happens to be a very different style of politics. It's part of a wider difference in culture and in style of relationship that currently seems to be increasing in much of the world. That's what I plan to explore, briefly, here.

Consideration of that wider context may help to set the scene. At times, dramatic shifts can occur. Traditional ways then begin to fail before new ways have adequately been established. Old systems and practices begin to collapse before their replacements have been found. Such a time arose between the two world wars. In the words of Antonio Gramsci, writing from an Italian prison in 1930,

> *the old is dying and the new cannot be born.*

More recently, the Director of the International Futures Forum, Graham Leicester explained why the new cannot be born. Interviewed by John Wilson in April 2013 he said:

> *… Maybe we just don't understand how the world works any more. And we're using a set of outdated models and mindsets to grasp a very different*

> *world … The real challenge now is to figure out how to take action in a world we don't …understand and can't control. …*

Other commentators are beginning to make similar comments about the challenge of the present. Another Antonio, António Guterres, has also indicated this. The very first sentence in his 2021 report as UN Secretary-General was: "*We are at an inflection point in history*".

That's my perception too. I suspect we may be in a time of great flux and uncertainty, perhaps greater than most of us realise.

In many respects it is currently difficult to foresee what form the "new" will take if and when it is born. Two concepts from complexity theory can clarify the nature of the present inflection point. The labels for those concepts are ***complicated***, and ***complex***.

A ***complicated*** situation is one with many elements, but that are only sparsely interconnected. A jet airliner is often given as an example. Yes, there are many different elements. No one person has the expertise and experience required for complete understanding. However, once the relevant information has been assembled the situation can be understood. The more elements there are, the more experts may be required to provide enough understanding. And they must be able to communicate with one another. But its future is foreseeable.

The point to be made is that in situations that are merely complicated, conventional planning can be effective. It is possible for relevant experts to devise a sequence of future actions that can plot an effective way forward. Adequate monitoring then provides the minor adjustments needed in practice. The airliner can be built and flown.

A ***complex*** situation is very different. There are many elements and also *many interactions between them*. That dramatically changes the situation and how it can be resolved. As in the earlier quotes, it's as if the world is shifting. The future we currently face may be even less predictable than usual.

Take a moment to consider the far-reaching implications of that shift. If the future is unknown, conventional planning approaches no longer work. Planning has to become a dramatically different process. That is more easily said than done.

We are well-practised with many of our conventional approaches to problem solving and decision making. They have become routine for us. There is a temptation to assume that conventional planning does still work, even though it often does not. In addition, we have developed social structures that work best only if the future is predictable. As predictability declines, our systems struggle to maintain their conventional bureaucratic structures and procedures. There was evidence of that in organisations over half a century ago, and even earlier on the battlefield.

Years of relative stability have allowed us to become set in our ways and in our thinking. But then, as predictability fails, so do hierarchical structures and bureaucratic procedures. They worked well enough in the past. It is too easy to assume that they still do ... until they don't. More effective alternatives can seem countercultural and inappropriate. As evidenced by the many case studies on the corporate-rebels.com website, there are alternatives that are beneficial for people and profits. Despite the benefits they offer they are seldom imitated.

I take this as evidence that the world is inflecting, to use António Guterres's word. Perhaps the world has changed more than we realise. Perhaps, as Graham Leicester ventured, we *don't* understand how the world works anymore.

What exists beyond the inflection point — as if around a corner — cannot be seen. An approach such as action research is intended to deal with such a difficulty. It exemplifies the shift to a different manner of planning. Supported by different models and mindsets it also embodies different social structures and relationships. The stories in this volume provide insights into *processes* that are relevant for a less-predictable future. They also illustrate appropriate *social structures and relationships*. However, this means that action research is countercultural. You will read of several examples of how, within the larger systems that embed it, action research *does* sometimes struggle to be born.

If you observe the sequence of actions in a typical action research study, you will notice it differs from many other studies. The overall shape may be planned as only a broad outline. Departure from that overall plan is expected, and even welcomed. A *cyclic* process of step-by-step trial and error is common. Most action research proceeds in such a way, tentatively, step by step. Viewed as a process, action research alternates between action and reflection. An action is taken. The results are observed. If the action worked as expected, the next action is taken. If not, the action is modified

and repeated. A common description of the cycle is *plan → act and observe → reflect*. From the reflection, understanding emerges. In that respect action research is true to label. It is action *and* research, integrated.

An important expectation guides such an approach. Action by action, it is assumed some aspects of the situation reveal themselves only when an attempt is made to change them. Kurt Lewin is often quoted as having said,

> *if you want truly to understand something, try to change it*.

There is some debate about the source of that quote, though not about its relevance. To achieve change we take steps provisionally, one at a time. Each step also helps us to build our understanding and theory. As we move forward, we discover some aspects of the situation only when we stub our toes on them.

Powerfully, the same cyclic process of trial and error is relevant at any scale. It can be used to anticipate the approximate shape of an overall action research study. It can also be applied at smaller scales, even moment by moment. The cycles are most powerful when nested — briefer cycles within somewhat larger cycles within larger cycles again ... And so on.

Accompanying the cyclic process, and supporting it, is a set of values and beliefs. Action researchers value democracy and justice. In most action research studies, the participants are involved directly and preferably deeply in each phase of a cycle. As much of the action research literature proclaims, action research is *with people*, not *on people*. The assumption is that all people are respected. All are treated as equals. That does not preclude different roles for different people. Participation implies equality, not identity. The aim is for all participants to be *partners* with the researchers. The research is intended to improve the situation for them in ways that they help to choose. They contribute from their different experience and understanding.

In short, action research may be regarded as apolitical. Alternatively, as we have done here, it can be viewed as being political but in a very different way. Its politics has two key dimensions. It is ...

- egalitarian for everyone without being regimented.
- with the goal of reaching agreement, differing views are welcomed and openly voiced, collaboratively.

In many social systems, such an approach is currently rare, and (as I've said) countercultural. For that matter, action researchers sometimes fall short of their aspirations.

The intention of action research is that progress and learning for everyone is achieved. In pursuit of that goal, an action research study involves everyone if possible. Together, step by step, they plan and act — and progress and learn. As you will see in the chapters that follow, this is helped by the processes followed. Also important are the values and ethics, guiding how the process is implemented, and with whom.

The countercultural nature of action research can have implications within a study. However, the politics can become most fractious at the boundary between the study and its wider context. This can be very true within an academic context. Within a study, ideally participants will be encouraged to express their views. When different people have different views, collaborative negotiation allows a path to the agreed goals to be negotiated. Universities, on the other hand, may expect their own values and ethics to prevail. Other views, such as those of action researchers, may be silenced.

As you read on, you will find examples of ethics committees whose decisions are not negotiated or negotiable. You will find many examples of such a clash of politics in many of the chapters that follow. To borrow a metaphor from Don Schön (see chapter ten of this book), it's a clash between opposing views. There are those who favour the predictability of the high ground. Others have to deal with the lower predictability but greater relevance of the swampy lowlands. And that's where practitioners and action researchers make their way.

—Bob Dick

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Action research (inquiry) is believed to have been instigated by Kurt Lewin (1946), a student of renowned educational philosopher John Dewey, whose name is associated with the idea of reflective practice (Groundwater-Smith and Ewing, 2010). Action research is a practical outplaying of reflective practice (Anderson and Herr, 1999). Following Lewin's immigration from Europe after the WW2 European Holocaust, he was employed at Massachusetts (U.S.A) Institute of Technology (MIT) and developed his research approach in the context of his social justice agenda to address housing and employment challenges for disadvantaged groups in United States of America (Somekh, 1995, 346). Developing this approach took place at a time when his discipline Psychology, was manoeuvring to establish itself in the academic world.

Rapoport (1970, 500) elaborated on the migration of ideas from post WW2 to the MIT thinktank and suggested that the famous Tavistock Institute of Human Relations was founded upon the action programs initiated by Psychologists and Social anthropologists to treat returning WW2 prisoners of war' neuroses. The WW2 returnees explored how to collaborate and solve their own problems. These initiatives and realisations translated into the emerging organisational science.

Hendricks (2019) paints a slightly different picture as to the origins and particularly the originator of action research, describing the work of John Collier, USA Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945, and his advocacy for research *with* native American Indians as compared to *on* them. Hendricks (2019) explained that while Collier did not use the term action research, but instead referred to "research-action, action-research" (Collier, 1945, 293), the processes of collaboration that he advocated and described would be recognised today as action research.

The social justice agenda connected to action research was further developed with critical theorist Paolo Freire's (1968) work with disadvantaged groups in Brazil. With the reinvigoration of these processes, often in the context of educational innovation, this approach came to be referred to as emancipatory action research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, 205), one of the many forms of action research.

Action Research and the Paradigm Wars: Challenges to Positivism

Susman and Evered (1978), identifying a crisis in positivist science, particularly regarding the emergent field of organisational inquiry in which they worked, relied on Lewin's (1946) description of his process to propose an alternative research method of action research. A similar challenge to positivism and its research process was lodged by Guba and Lincoln (1982). They offered 'naturalistic inquiry' as an alternative to scientific method, particularly in research that involved people. Guba and Lincoln's (1982) argument advocated that 'naturalistic inquiry' might have greater relevance than its comparatives working from positivist paradigms when it came to undertaking research with people. Both Susman and Evered's (1978) and Guba and Lincoln's (1982) challenges relied on a concept proposed by Thomas Kuhn (1962) that every practice was underpinned by a set of beliefs or a paradigm. Susman and Evered (1978) and Guba and Lincoln (1982) both applied the notion of paradigm to the sets of beliefs underpinning

research practices. The challenges represented the ‘paradigm wars’ that explored the application/exploration of paradigm in research practice, illuminating and challenging the belief system that underpinned those practices. The ‘paradigm wars’ foreshadowed a range of alternatives to the dominance of scientific method in research practice.

In a parallel discourse at around the same time as the ‘paradigm wars’, British educational thinker Lawrence Stenhouse (1981) asked the question ‘what counts as research?’ and, like Susman and Evered (1978) and Guba and Lincoln (1982), advocated an alternative to a positivistic approach to research with people which he labelled ‘practitioner inquiry’. Schön (1983) similarly advocated an alternative paradigm for research practice in his propositions for ‘Reflective practice’, as did Mischler (1990) with ‘Narrative inquiry’ and Gray (1996) with ‘Practice-led inquiry’. Collectively they represent a range of discontent related to positivist thinking as it applied to research practices.

Introducing an alternate way of undertaking investigation involved a challenge to the paradigm that had dominated research practice for some time. The belief system that underpinned research practices was linked to Comte’s (1864) positivist conception of science (often referred to as positivism). Susman and Evered (1978), in their challenge to positivist dominance in the organisational research space explained…

> *The positivist conception of science has dominated the physical, biological, and social sciences for more than. a hundred years. Comte (1864) who is generally credited with the term positivism, used the word “positive” to refer to the actual in contrast to the imaginary, to what can claim certainty in contrast to the undecided, to the exact in contrast to the indefinite. We will use the term positivist science for all approaches to science that consider scientific knowledge to be obtainable only from sense data that can be directly experienced and verified between independent observers. Although commitment to an empirical base for scientific knowledge characterizes what we are calling positivist science, the term subsumes different approaches to generating scientific knowledge.*

Advancing the conversation about positivism’s earlier origins, Kock, McQueen, and Scott (1997, 6) suggested …

> *Descartes' treatise “Discourse on Method”, published early in the 17th century, had a strong influence in shaping positivist thought. The Cartesian work supported methods using natural science and mathematics as much as possible to understand nature. In doing so, Descartes argued, human beings would be able to understand the world in an unbiased way, unaffected by*

the imperfections of their sensorial organs. This is also seen as likely to have allowed Descartes to carry on with his scientific inquiry without incurring the problems of his predecessors with the Church (Hirschheim, 1985).

Positivism developed with little opposition until the first half of the 19th century, with prominent contributions from Francis Bacon, Galileo, Newton, Hobbes and later from August Comte, who stated unequivocally that the study of human phenomena should reflect methods of physical science (Teichman and Evans, 1995). In the second half of the 19th century anti-positivists entered the research scene suggesting that individuals do not exist in isolation, and that they therefore need to be understood as part of the cultural and social environment from which they are part. Following this vigorous rise of anti-positivism, positivism strengthened again in the 1920s with Bertrand Russell's logical positivism and later with the hypothetical-deductive and units of analysis methods. But this wave was again strongly criticised by several social scientists, giving way to the emergence of new knowledge building paradigms and epistemologies such as post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism. Among the shared assumptions of these emerging paradigms and epistemologies is the belief that there is a plurality of methods, and that each method has its validity determined by the specific situation in and by which it is applied.

Speaking specifically about the impact of the paradigm revolution in Educational Research, Gage (1989) summarised the revolution at the time as utilising critiques from three different perspectives or schools of thought:

1. The anti-naturalists,
2. the interpretivists and
3. the critical theorists.

Thus, this intricate web or labyrinth of conversations and investigations provided the foundation for action research.

The Diversifying Foundations and Expanding Horizons of Action Research

It is evident in this chronology that some writers used the term inquiry (for example Mischler, 1990; Gray, 1996) to distinguish their approaches from the scientific and positivist traditions of research. They argue that the use of the term ‘research’ brings with it often unrecognised expectations about research practice that the new methods are challenging. Several action inquiry writers adopt the same approach.

As is evident in the earlier paragraphs, there is no single identified philosophical provenance for action research. People adopting action inquiry as their basis for undertaking research, provide an array of alternatives to this hypothetical origin.

Cher Hendricks (2019) writing on The History of Action Research in Education for *The Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education* (Mertler, C. Ed.) suggested…

> *While many scholars attribute Stephen Corey with bringing action research to the field of education in the mid-1940s, some suggest that the action research movement in education pre-dates even Lewin. Hodgkinson (1957), McKernan (1986), Wann (1952), and Noffke (1997) point to the progressive education movement that began as early as the late nineteenth century, which encouraged the application of the scientific method to educational problems but also involved teachers in the process. McKernan identifies works by Bain (1879), Boone (1904), and Bobbitt (1918) as the earliest examples of educational action research, particularly in the area of applying the scientific method to the study of curricula problems.*

Webb (1989, 494), detailed a provenance of nurse practitioners investigating their practice, identifying the approach in common as 'action research' and as one of several approaches within what she described as 'methodological eclecticism'. In a subsequent paper, Webb (1992, 750) aligned action research with Habermasian (1971) philosophy.

> *Action research arises from the critical paradigm associated with social scientists such as Habermas (1971). Thompson (1987) describes critical scholarship as a way of seeing, thinking, and speaking about the social world that has broken, irrevocably, with conventional forms of scholarship in nursing. Critical scholarship is defined here as a pattern of thought and action that challenges institutionalized power relations or relations of domination in the social reality of nursing.*

Alrichter and Gstettner (1993), writing about action research in Europe and Scandinavia, detailed another challenge to the source of action research that was predominant in the German speaking action research movement. This alternate source was Lewin's colleague J. L. Moreno, who in many instances was his co-facilitator of workshops associated with action research. The origins of action research were disputed between German writers, with some suggesting that Moreno was one who worked intuitively whereas Lewin focussed more on the logic of the paradigm change.

Coghlan (2007) writing about insider action inquiry (research) credited the Action Science work of Argyris, Putnam, and Smith (1985) for inspiring action inquiry (research). From this source, Coghlan (2007, 295) identified several central tenets.

1. *It (Action Research) involves change experiments on real problems in social systems. It focuses on a particular problem and seeks to provide assistance to the client system.*
2. *It, (Action Research) like social management more generally, involves iterative cycles of identifying a problem, planning, acting and evaluating.*
3. *The intended change in an action research project typically involves re-education, a term that refers to changing patterns of thinking and action that are presently well-established in individuals and groups. A change intended by change agents is typically at the level of norms and values expressed in action.*
4. *It (Action Research) challenges the status quo from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education.*
5. *It (Action Research) is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed nor the relation to practice be lost.*

Other action research authors described action research in terms of what it was not! Kemmis and McTaggart (1981, 22) made quite explicit that action research was **not** research done on other people. By the time Reason (1988) had collaborated with a group of other researchers to produce *Human Inquiry in Action*, these ideas of seeing, thinking and speaking about the social world were being described as research *with* people rather than *on* people.

Global Expansion and Institutionalization of Action Research

Action research places an emphasis on action, and much of its development can be attributed to centres for action research in which advocates practically explored the implications of doing action research.

Writing for his doctoral dissertation in Agricultural Extension at Cornell University, Julio Daniel Selener (1992) identified four (then) traditions of

participatory action research each elaborated in the book publication based on his doctoral inquiry (Selener, 1997).

1. Participatory research in community development

   (characterized by concepts inspired by Paulo Freire and other radical intellectuals in the late 60s, including critical thinking, critical consciousness, conscientization, and empowerment – Selener, 1997, 7)

2. Action research in organisations

   (Epitomised by work done by Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London and the Work Research Institute in Oslo - Selener, 1997, 8)

3. Action research in Education

   (The origins of this approach can be traced to B.R. Buckingham's Research for Teachers, published in 1926 - Selener, 1997, 8)

4. Farmer participatory research

   (Farmer participatory research is also known as participatory technology development. This approach was developed gradually, primarily by agricultural researchers and other rural development workers, as an alternative to the traditional "transfer of technology" or "top-down" approach to agricultural research and extension- Selener, 1997, 8)

The last of the traditions was Selener's own identified persuasion, having moved through undergraduate and postgraduate master's research in Argentina's agricultural communities and later studying at Cornell University (U.S.A).

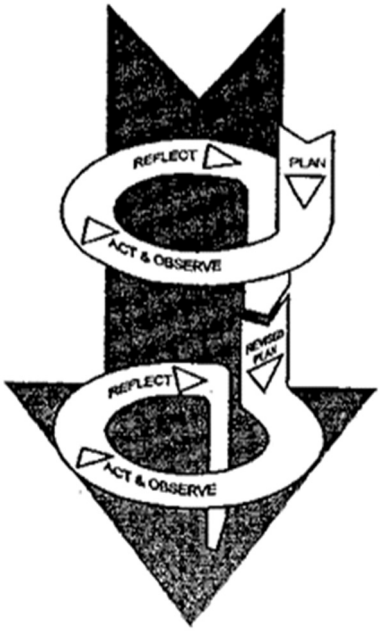
Other communities of action research practice are evident in the literature. Greenwood (2012) made mention of a number of these in his discussion about the introduction and survival of action research within higher education. He mentioned the participatory action research network based at Cornell University in U.S.A., as well as

1. Norwegian University of Science and Technology,
2. Deakin University and Southern Cross University, in Australia and
3. The Centre for Action Research in Professional practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath in U.K.

Not only did these centres for inquiry encourage practitioners, the centres have been identified as origin sites of several iconic action research texts which introduced the theory (models) that underpinned the way in which cycles of inquiry could lead to transformation of an identified problem.

- Kemmis and McTaggart (1981) at Deakin University in Australia developed *The Action Research Planner.*

  The text also offered one of the models of the cycles of inquiry (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1981, 11) (model reproduced with permission) that simplified a process of continual inquiry.



In her teaching story in *Reflecting on University Teaching Academic Stories* (Ballantyne, Bain and Packer, 1997, 199), Jo-Anne Reid commented on this text as the foundation for a unit developed by Stephen Kemmis, Colin Henry and Robin McTaggart at Deakin University. She applauded the way in which the text scaffolded getting underway with an action research study.

- Reason (1988) at the University of Bath U.K. Centre for Action Research in Professional practice developed *Human Inquiry in Action: developments in New Paradigm research*. The centre was initiated by Peter Reason, Judi Marshall and David Simms in 1993, and was instrumental in several other centres for action research being subsequently created, such as Ashridge Business School, Lancaster University Management School and University of Bristol (Marshall, 2014).

- Greenwood (2012) referred to a book/text developed by Kathryn Herr (Montclair University, USA) and Gary Anderson (New York University, USA), *The Action Research Dissertation* (Herr and

Anderson, 2005), which was a handbook for a particular set of action researchers represented by the Higher Education Research groups. This text addressed uncertainty common to doctoral candidates as they undertook various doctoral investigations. The handbook focussed on the problems of presenting an inquiry based on action research in a dissertation.

Centres of action research study within Education schools at both Bath University (U.K.) and Griffith University (Australia) developed action research practice guides. Jean McNiff (1984) at Bath University school of Education developed *Action Research: A Generative Model for In-Service Support*. Like Kemmis and McTaggart's (1981) *The Action Research Planner,* McNiff's book scaffolded countless doctoral candidates. undertaking action research. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (1991), working at a specialist Higher Education centre for Teaching and Learning at Griffith University, developed *Action Research in Higher Education* which similarly provided a theoretical scaffold for Higher Education practitioners investigating their practices.

Greenwood (2012) also mentioned new and emerging centres at *University of Cincinnati (USA) and University of Bristol (U.K.),* and clusters of action research practitioners working around other key players- such as Sonia Ospina's work at the Wagner School of Public Service at *New York University* and Ken Reardon's work at City and Regional Planning at the *University of Memphis*.

While many of the action research communities were associated with physical and identified geography – such as Bath, U.K. and Bendigo, Australia - the innovation of an on-line provision helped to make action research available at an international level. **Action Research and Evaluation on-line (AREOL)** was initiated by Bob Dick at Queensland University in Australia. Invited by a colleague Alan Davies to take up a lectureship at the newly created university at Lismore, Australia (Southern Cross University), and within a brief from its new Vice Chancellor to create an international focus for the university, Bob Dick initially created an on-line conversation in the form of an email list in 1994, and the following year developed this into the Southern Cross University model of AEROL**.** These communities of practice advanced the thinking about the many variations of action research.

Bob Dick's AEROL site tells the story of its development.

> *He had been working at Queensland University and was eyeing the horizon for alternative positions. His colleague Alan Davies had been invited to take up a lectureship at the newly formed University of Southern Cross and in this process and responding to the new Vice Chancellor's agenda to make Southern Cross University internationally famous suggested that it could take an action research approach and recommended Bob Dick to lead this innovation. Bob had already created an interest in action research using his AR list – an email communication on which practitioners and academics could pose and answer questions and issues, and in setting up the Southern Cross model created AEROL* (www.aral.com.au)

Bob's story was verified by Alan Davie's (Sankaran, Hase, Dick and Davies, 2007) own story.

> *I found myself at the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education (NRCAE), which eventually became the University of New England (Northern Rivers) and then Southern Cross University (SCU). My aim was to legitimize and embed action research and open systems thinking in the DNA of a tertiary educational institution. I became an advisor in the CEO's office, firstly of the director of the NRCAE and then of the inaugural vice-chancellor (VC) of SCU. Both these people were leaders and risk-takers who seemed to share and value my broad direction despite this causing them difficulties with their councils, unions and senior executives. Opportunistically, I accepted an invitation from another university, to be involved in an action research based distance PhD program located in Singapore and Hong Kong. The VC supported my involvement as it brought experience of such programs into SCU. I was asked to supervise a 'pod' of six students and involved Bob Dick as co-supervisor. Four of the six graduated within three years and were among the first six of a cohort of 100 to graduate, despite a whole range of difficulties with the ethics committee and the Graduate Degrees Committee. Following this, the VC was open to supporting the development of a similar program for SCU in Singapore with some modifications based on my experience. At the time, I was on the SCU academic board, the university council and the VC's executive committee. This was useful in establishing some structures supportive of action research and in gaining the understanding and support of the dean of postgraduate studies. I was part of an informal team which included Shankar Sankaran (one of the four graduates I had supervised), Stewart Hase and Bob Dick. My institutional role came to an end in 2000. Stewart and Shankar took up institutional roles in the Graduate College of Management.*

Jack Whitehead at Bath University U.K. established a similar international on-line network for action research at ActionResearch.net

Action research: a changing construct

With these centres for action research evolving around the world, the idea of action research also developed. Early work by Paolo Freire (1968) with disadvantaged groups in Brazil led to an action research variation of emancipatory action research.

Writing from the basis of thinking at the Deakin University centre in Australia, Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis (1986, 202) added two additional types of action research, one of which was described in deficit terms - **Technical Action Research:**

> *where facilitators have co-opted practitioners into working on externally-formulated questions which are not based in the practical concerns of the teachers .... technical action research employs techniques like the techniques of group dynamics to create and sustain investigation of issues by the outsider, and it frequently concerns itself solely with efficiency and effectiveness of practices in generating outcomes. ...while it can produce valuable changes in practice...the value may be in the eyes of the observer.)*

and their second extended what they called **practical action research** (that represented the mainstream action research) which they named **Emancipatory action research.**

> *In emancipatory action research, educational development is understood as a joint enterprise which expresses a joint commitment to the development of educational practices as forms of interaction which, taken together, form the fabric of social and educational relationships ... thus emancipatory action research includes the impulses and forms of practical action research but extends them into a collaborative context.*

Carr and Kemmis' (1986) use of the term emancipatory was derived from Habermas's Critical Social Science framework, but their description of how the aspect of action research applied to disadvantaged communities resonated with Friere's (1968) work in that Friere advocated intervention to bring about social change and thus address the problem of disadvantage.

Similarly, within the lived experiences of researchers undertaking organisational change research at the Centre for Organisational Change at Bath University, Peter Reason and Judy Marshall (1987, 112) laid the foundation for what would later become three variations in undertaking action research of first person, second person and third person action research.

They wrote….

> *All good research is for me, for us and for them: it speaks to three audiences and contributes to each of these three areas of knowing. It is for them to the extent that it produces some kind of generalizable ideas and outcomes which elicit the response 'That's interesting!' from those who are concerned to understand a similar field (Davis, l97l). lt is for us to the extent that it responds to concerns of our praxis, is relevant and timely, and so produces the response 'That works!' from those who are struggling with problems in their field of action. lt is for me to the extent that the process and outcomes respond directly to the individual researchers being in the world, and so elicits the response 'that's exciting!'- taking exciting back to its root meaning to set in action.*

Later, Marshall (1999), building on this idea and philosophy articulated ..

> *In this paper I explain what I mean by living life as inquiry, showing how I apply notions of inquiry as method to many areas of my professional and personal activities and how research ideas are generated and tested throughout my life space. The paper has twin tracks which reflect the interwoven processes I am describing and advocating. One is more practice based; in it I outline some of my inquiry practices and dilemmas, and give two examples from my work situation. The second track is more focused on theory, highlighting ideas about systemic analysis, influencing change, relational work and gender. Writing the paper became an example of my topic. I therefore note features of the text which illustrate processes and practices of inquiry.*

By the conversations in 2000, these ideas of writing for me, us and them would have evolved into first person, second person and third person action inquiry.

Coghlan (2007) wrote,

> *Within action research there is a growing appreciation of the constructs of first, second and third person inquiry/practice developed by Torbert (1998, Reason and Torbert, 2001) that provides a lens whereby individual inquiry and learning is implemented in collaborative with others and both then lead to dissemination to the impersonal third party audience. Action research doctoral programmes have the potential to exhibit the quality of the three voices/practices of action research that Torbert described*

accrediting the creation of these variations (constructs) in action research to Torbert (1998), however Reason and Marshall's (1987) writing preceded this.

By the time these variations in what action research was had emerged in the conversations, *The Handbook of Action Research* (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) had been published and in its introduction. Peter Reason and Judy Marshall conceived action research as…

> *a practice for the systematic development of knowing and knowledge, but based in a rather different form from traditional academic research—it has different purposes, is based in different relationships, it has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice.*

Their comments sum up the challenge of introducing a book about an inquiry methodology which has so many different variations and histories that it is a challenge – hence our choice of a labyrinth.

Another example of derived forms of action research is evident in writing by Davison, Martinsons and Kock (2004) in which they draw on the Susman and Evered (1978) argument for action research, suggesting that the wide usage of this particular reference warrants the approach outlined be classed as 'canonical'.

In the years leading up to 2014, Sage publications took the initiative of commissioning an *Encyclopaedia of Action Research*. The text was a major collaboration with Editors (David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller) and associated editors Victor Friedman, David Greenwood and Shankar Sankaran working with an extensive editorial board and a collection of section authors all around the globe. Acknowledged in its introduction as itself an action research project, such a text was able to show the vast diversity of philosophies, models and applications of action research.

In her work, Toula Gordillo utilised action research in her Jungian practice and as a result developed a Jungian Form of Action Research which involved utilising a Jungian lens in the reflective elements of action research (Gordillo, 2021).

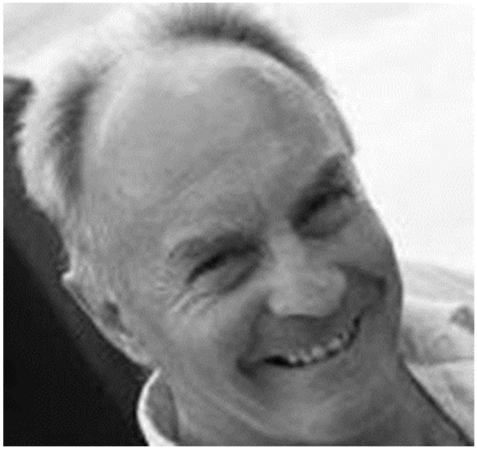
Describing her approach, Gordillo suggested

> *Jungian action research is the investigative method I have used for 10+ years in schools, medical centres and private organisations during the creation of Story Image Therapy (SIT®) and SIT Shadow Work™. Situated within a Jungian framework, and incorporating natural law philosophy, my clinical practice is grounded in formal academic research as well as the less formal Jungian action research I've conducted in consultation with clients, students and colleagues. During a particularly stressful period in my life, I then used my own therapy to help heal wounds originating during*

> *my adolescent years. My first-person Jungian action research journey is detailed in my recently published second book, The Rise of Jung in Me. In the book, I further describe my second- and third-person Jungian action research method through six case studies. SIT Shadow Work is now an evidence-based therapeutic method that has helped transform the lives of thousands of individuals diagnosed with mental health issues.* [Toula Gordillo - Academia.edu]

Development of new forms of action research continue to emerge from its many practitioners.

The authors amidst this development of action research



Geof Hill undertook his first action inquiry (research) in the context of a Master of Science Social Ecology research degree in 1990. Graduating in 1994, he immediately undertook a Professional Doctorate exploring the influence of new paradigm inquiry on several higher degree stakeholders – the candidates, the supervisors, the examiners (Hill, 2002a). Living in Brisbane, Australia and having a close connection with the Action Learning Action Research association (ALARA), Geof continued to utilise action inquiry in many of his subsequent Higher Education investigations. Geof has written about action inquiry and has supervised and examined action inquiry dissertations. He has served as a critical friend for several action research projects. He has also been involved in several organisational issues – such as facilitating Philosophy Cafés and organising national conferences - with and for Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) and

writing for and reviewing publications of action research through their journal (ALARj).

Andrew Rixon, PhD, is an internationally experienced leadership coach, action researcher and educator specializing in leadership and organizational change through storytelling and narrative techniques. In 2009, Andrew founded The Story Conference (http://www.thestoryconference.com.au), a national story conference providing a space for practitioners interested in the use and application of story and narrative techniques for individuals, communities, and organisations and has been the co-editor of the three books emerging from this community of practice: *The Story Cookbook: Practical Recipes for Change*, *Making sense of stories: An Inquirers Compendium*, and *Facilitating with Stories: Ethics, Reflective Practice and Philosophies*.

Andrew is well known for integrating action research into his work, emphasizing participatory and reflective processes to address real-world problems. Andrew has a special focus and deep expertise in health systems leadership. With significant experience across Australian business schools he is a faculty member at Griffith Business School.

How have we structured this book?

Like our previous association with stories (*Making sense of stories: an inquirer's compendium*) (Hill and Rixon, 2021), we began this project expecting that we would follow a similar process and solicit stories from countless stakeholders in our networks who have been involved with action

inquiry (research). From the outset we had to contend with an important variation in our own perceptions of action research. Geof had a preference to use the term inquiry, in line with several other practitioners the arguments of whom we have outlined in this chapter. Andrew's preference was for the term research. We compromised on a basis of the term research being more familiar – and hence in the title, and the dilemma in reference addressed in a single paragraph in this chapter.

A realisation very early in our book development drew our attention to the plethora of stories about action inquiry already in the discourse. Since its inception, different stakeholders have written about action inquiry and in so doing have often included their own stories as the basis for (data for) their lived experience investigation. We decided to organise these stories around the obvious stakeholders and as well, have provision for what surprises we might find. It did not take long to uncover other themes being explored such as the multiple challenges in writing and publishing action inquiry.

The chapters of our book that have emerged from an initial response and analysis of the stories we have collected are as follows.

Chapter 1: Introduction
Chapter 2: Methodology: Storytelling as Inquiry
Chapter 3: Ethics
Chapter 4: Provenance
Chapter 5: The nature of political discourse
Chapter 6: Illuminating storytelling as inquiry

Then the chapter headings of the themes that are identified/interpreted in the data/stories

Chapter 7: Stories of the Silencing.
(how some action research stakeholders are silenced)
Chapter 8: Stories of Empowering.
(how some action research stakeholders are empowered)

Chapter 9: Stories about gatekeepers.
(people who limit action research)
Chapter 10: Stories about pathways through the 'swamp'.
(ways in which stakeholders find new ways of working)

Chapter 11: Stories about meaning shifts.
(ways in which action research changes people)