

Practices section introduction

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The diverse action research practices in this section have been used to inquire “into questions that are professionally or personally developmental, socially controversial, or require social healing” (Cooperative Inquiry, Citizen Jury), “to enable... excluded people to gain more control of their lives and to release... locked up assets (Appreciative Inquiry), and to generate contextual knowledge about specific community needs that dominant research practices ignore (Community Based Participatory Research [CBPR]). These practices have been used to engage, sustain and scale “movement networks” (Network Innovation Lab) across a whole eco-system (Awareness-based Action Research), and to create specific local “third places—a home away from home—that afford comfort and engagement” (World Café) to help “triple strangers” develop community and express identities that they are constrained from expressing in their everyday lives (Appreciative Inquiry). These practices have helped us engage with “our shit” (PLA/PRA-CLTS), both literally and figuratively as a way of bypassing normal frames of reference and opening up dialogues that would otherwise not be possible.

In this introduction we draw attention to how nuance, diversity and local context are approached in unique ways which creatively reach key stakeholders, both in terms of inclusion but also in terms of ways of knowing. In doing so we hope to start a conversation in each reader’s mind about how steps, moments, methods and other techniques that are presented are indeed grounded in people’s practices—i.e. their contextualized life experiences—and how their future use might therefore continue their adaptation to new local contexts, and continued evolution as reflected-upon patterns of experience. In the following paragraphs we highlight several themes which emerged across the different chapters.

From appreciative to appreciating and critical inquiry

Rather than focus on deficits and problems Appreciative Inquiry utilizes “the power of the unconditional positive question” to discover and build on “the best of what is, or the ‘life giving properties’ within social systems. But Graham Duncan notes that when participant experiences are characterized by hardship and oppression, insisting on the positive question at best may generate conversations that lack conviction, but more troubling, may fail to honor the integrity of participant experiences, and may further marginalize their voice. Duncan makes a shift from appreciative to an appreciating inquiry, by creating spaces in which sometimes difficult participant stories are not characterized by strength or positive reframing, but are deeply appreciated in a community environment, thus creating a bond and allowing a quality of relationship to develop that is emotionally rich, unique and transgressive.

Action evaluation also seeks to take in and “appreciate” people’s shared and divergent goals and the “passion points” that underlie them, in planning processes which are conflictual by their very nature. Although it seeks “consensus”, it subjects the “theories in use” of all stakeholders to redesign through feedback processes, thus improving critical thinking and the quality of action in change processes. ***This theme of moving from appreciative to “appreciating” inquiry, yet with a critical feedback lens, can also strengthen other practices.***

Opening possibilities by bypassing normal frames to engage with people’s experiences

The learning history process described herein was being used to help inspire internal culture change and dialogue that would enable growth of a physician leadership education program of an academic medical center. Hanging posters and previous learning history artifacts told a difficult story of robots and a big concrete bunker (the academic medical center) pitted against small and living plants (the Leadership Program) gleaned from learning history interviews with key stakeholders. Although none of the cultural images offered were positive they were grounded in people’s experiences and therefore were seen as

shared and not as one person's guarded inquiry. Pitting the contrast in images generated a creative tension that opened up avenues for creative responses, generating enthusiasm that eventually helped fund next cycles of the program.

The Learning History also highlights the importance of alternative frames for addressing difficult issues. The informal café style and sharing of food, as well as the visual depictions of experience certainly enabled conversations that other environments may not have. World Café also seeks to bypass normal frames of engagement by creating hospitable spaces in which usual routines and authority structures might be suspended. Café design warrants close attention to the physical and emotional space that provides comfort and opportunities for engagement. ***Opening possibilities by bypassing normal frames to engage with people's experiences helps action researchers address conflict in several chapters.***

Flexibility, emergence and the risks of instrumentalization

As practices become popular there is a tendency for some to use them as recipes rather than principles with flexible methods. But because of the unique contexts in which these practices are used, guidelines and recipes may be of limited value in practice. World Café, Citizen Juries, Learning Histories, CBPR, Photovoice, and Cooperative Inquiry all stress flexibility so that themes can emerge in ways which “democratise authority largely through craft skills and processes of dialogue, rather than by rigidly following fixed methods or protocols” (Citizen Juries), and which are open to unexpected results—not perfectly attributable to the process at hand (Learning Histories). Lykes and Scheib go further by arguing that instrumentalization dilutes and detracts from the original liberating purposes of Photovoice. They advocate for the incorporation of PAR principles so that critical reflexivity and enhanced participation may enhance the emancipatory potential of this arts-based resource. And Krot and Stefanac remind us that to avoid our instrumentalizing tendencies and to be able to cope with ever common Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environments, we as action researchers need to upgrade our own abilities to understand context, be self-aware, learn through experience, manage conflict, and influence without authority. This theme of ***flexibility, emergence and the risks of instrumentalization is relevant throughout the works presented in this section.***

(re)Politicizing action, participation and knowledge generation

Like Chambers, Wakeford, Pimbert and Walcon warn of bad practice when communities become subject to “a carnival of participatory methods that... leaves everything essentially the same.” They take specific aim at Citizen Juries, which—rather than robust processes of deliberative democracy—in many cases have tended towards being mere show-trials which have been employed to give the appearance of public legitimacy to political decisions that have already been made behind closed doors. They call for formally incorporating PAR principles to help counter the ‘epistemic injustice’ that occurs when professional expertise is supported at the expense of other forms of knowledge.

Action Learning also challenges outside expert knowledge which speaks about action without actually engaging in action. Like theatre-base PAR in Bangladesh, practice-centered approaches seek out “missing communities” in community-based research processes so that these may be informed by the practical and abstract knowledge of all “creative beings” seeking to transform their own realities. Indeed, these approaches speak to the importance of practice and local knowledge as fundamentally important sources of theory and future action. Similarly, Action Science, Empowerment Evaluation, PLA and Systematization of Experiences explicitly construct theories from practice, and demonstrate how these theories can then be used to transform practice and the organizational context in which practice is situated. We see a clear case of this in Ku and Kwok's 13-year engagement focused on urban planning with excluded populations in Hong Kong, which has subverted top-down decision-making, and permitted heretofore silenced people to articulate their criticisms in public spaces, and advocated for policy change in a powerful agency. The need to ***(re)Politicize action, participation and knowledge generation offers a caution to all.***

An invitation to embrace contradictions and explore diverse practices for diverse realities

Ethnographic Action Researchers (EAR) use “rich pictures” to map their own social networks of diverse people, activities, relationships and media to which they are linked. Action Inquiry shows how intentional integration of multiple alternative (diverse) approaches to inquiry (characterized by 27 flavors, 3 types of feedback, and 8 types of power) may lead to more transformative results. These and other practices ostensibly reconcile huge complexity in their well-constructed explanations. But to map diversity and embrace alternative approaches often reveals irreconcilable worldviews, deep contradictions and other challenges inherent in taking less-travelled pathways. Insider Action Researchers, for example, place themselves in inherently political and frequently contradictory roles as they play “the irreverent inmate”—one who is both a supporter of the people in the organization yet is also “a saboteur of the organization's rituals and is a questioner of some of its beliefs”! And Living theories for Education recognizes the living contradictions that exist when one’s “I” is removed to appear more scientific, yet how other complex contradictions arise when one’s “I” is rediscovered. As you engage with the chapters, you will see that these and other patterned practices are not intended to be used as “best practice” recipes, but instead to help real people grapple with life’s complexities in specific contexts by offering principles, philosophies and methods that act as “epistemological devices”—sources of good questions to ask of real life situations. A clear message that emerges across the chapters is the need for methodological plurality and hybridization (Systemic Intervention) to honor and grapple with the diverse realities in which practices are used. Like Whitehead’s Living Theories, practices are meant to help each of us “see ourselves” in the picture we are trying to transform. The use of these practices in different circumstances in fact yields a different practice each time—still recognizable in principle but modified to local realities in ways which alter their and our identities in rich ways. We invite you to join us in reviewing these practices critically and appreciatively, finding your “I” in each practice as you adapt and contextualize them to engage in reflective action that is relevant to the needs of diverse actors in our complex, contested social change realities.