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**EDITORIAL**

## Initiating action research

### Challenges and paradoxes of opening communicative space

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#### ABSTRACT

The success or failure of an action research venture often depends on what happens at the beginning of the inquiry process: in the way access is established, and on how participants and co-researchers are engaged early on. 'Opening communicative space' is important because, however we base our theory and practice of action research, the first steps are fateful. We draw on Habermas's theorizing of the boundary-crises between system and lifeworld to explore the theory behind the idea of communicative space. We attempt to bring these abstract concepts to life, and to illustrate key aspects of action research practice through a review of some of the key challenges, opportunities, and paradoxes which emerge in the early stages of action research projects. Drawing on the literature and on exemplars, we show how the process of opening communicative space can be mapped onto a theory of group development that suggests a progression through phases of inclusion, control, and intimacy. Furthermore, we review an example of third-person action research to illustrate some of the issues raised by the need for both external and internal validation. We conclude that the practices of opening communicative space are necessarily paradoxical, and put forward a list of paradoxes with which facilitators and initiators of action research may need to engage in the start-up phases of their work.

#### KEY WORDS

- communicative space
- early stages
- establishing action research
- Habermas
- paradox

The idea for a special issue on opening communicative space grew out of many years of engaging in, talking, writing about, and editorial and supervision work with action research projects, based in the diverse practices that make up the family of action research theory and practice. Whether the originating perspective was participatory action research, co-operative inquiry, dialogue conferences, appreciative inquiry, or feminist action research, the narrative seemed often to be told in terms of the practice of inquiry – ‘what we did together’. In defining their practice, action researchers will usually talk about engaging with participants in cycles of action and reflection to address issues of practical and pressing importance in their lives. We often refer back, for instance, to Lewin’s definition of ‘a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact finding about the results of the action’ (Lewin, 1946/1948, p. 206), as well as to democratic traditions and Freire’s critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

But, often, the success or failure of an inquiry venture depends on the conditions that made it possible, which lie much further back in the originating discussions: in the way the topic was broached, and on the early engagement with participants and co-researchers. ‘Opening communicative space’ is important because however we base our theory and practice of action research, these first steps are fateful. Before we can engage in cycles of action and reflection, or run dialogue conferences (Gustavsen, 2001), or start asking ‘unconditionally positive questions’ (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001), we need to have the ability to establish relations with an appropriate grouping of people, which means we must either have some access to the communities we are concerned about, or we need to develop legitimacy and the capacity to convene that goes alongside it. As Stephen Kemmis, building on Habermas, puts it:

The first step in action research turns out to be central: *the formation of a communicative space* which is embodied in networks of actual persons . . . A communicative space is constituted as issues or problems are opened up for discussion, and when participants experience their interaction as fostering the democratic expression of diverse views . . . [and as permitting] people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do . . . (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100; original italics)

In this introduction, we first draw on Habermas’s thought to explore the theory behind the idea of communicative space. We follow this with a review of some of the more well-articulated practices for opening communicative space, and develop an account of some the paradoxes and contradictions involved, referencing as we do so action research accounts published in this journal and elsewhere. Finally, we briefly introduce the articles in this issue.

## An overview of Habermas's theory of communicative action

A key aspect of Jürgen Habermas's (1975, 1984) critical theory is its concern with how a collective of diverse individuals may effectively coordinate their actions and orientations. In this sense, Habermas's project resonates with Richard Rorty's (1999, p. xxv) pragmatic standpoint, shared amongst many action researchers, that 'the purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do . . .'. Like Rorty, Habermas sees difference amongst individuals as the starting point for discussion aimed at mutual understanding and consensus. Habermas's point is not that such difference should be collapsed, but that, 'in those areas of common life subject to binding social norms' (McCarthy, 1984, p. xxiii), these norms should be collaboratively and communicatively forged amongst all those affected. Agreements reached are likely to involve a mediation of particular and general needs (McCarthy, 1984). In agreement with action research theory and practice, Habermas therefore advocates the need for ongoing critical discourse amongst members of a given community.

As part of this ongoing discourse, Habermas argues for the generally implicit validity claims which are raised when one engages in speech acts with others to be made explicit. He highlights the following dimensions to the validity or otherwise of an utterance: its comprehensibility and its claims to objective truth; its normative rightness; and its expressive sincerity (for a detailed analysis of the argumentation and justification methods relating to each of these validity claims, see Habermas, 1984; Kemmis, 2001). Making explicit such validity claims helps participants to understand the framework through which communicative exchanges may be mutually judged and understood, and to modify these claims, if convinced to do so in argumentation with others (Gelber, 2002).

Following Kemmis (2001, p. 95), communicative action is therefore 'the process by which participants test for themselves the comprehensibility, accuracy, sincerity, and moral appropriateness' of the various communicative acts which together constitute the formation of lifeworlds. By 'lifeworld', Habermas refers to the symbolic representation of society – a community's shared common understanding of 'who we are' and 'who we value being'. Kemmis continues:

Only when [participants] give their own unforced assent will they regard substantive claims raised in these processes as personally binding upon them . . . when a doubt arises about any such substantive claim, it will *not* be regarded as binding until it is underwritten by communicative action . . . (Kemmis, 2001, p. 95)

To the extent that the process of agreeing upon the rules of evidence is a participatory and un-coerced one, speech acts will be meaningful and effective, and of service in sustaining and furthering participants' lifeworlds. Habermas refers to this as an 'ideal speech situation', which he explains is 'neither an empirical phenomenon nor simply a construct, but a reciprocal supposition unavoidable

in discourse' (1975, p. xviii). For Habermas, the ideal speech situation may be sufficiently approximated, 'if only the argumentation could be conducted openly enough, and continued long enough' (1984, p. 42). Reflecting on the crucial status of both Habermas's and Freire's notions of idealized consensus and dialogue as *empirical counterfactuals*, Morrow and Torres explain:

That people act *as if* this were a real possibility is the necessary (though not sufficient) condition for whatever form of collective learning might transcend the mutually destructive and tragic struggles of the type metaphorically described in Hegel's master-and-slave dialectic. Rather than being an expression of [Habermas's and Freire's] presumed ignorance about the obstacles that get in the way of dialogue, this position reflects the most consistent attempt to place awareness of this problem at the heart of questions of ontology, epistemology, and social practice. (Morrow & Torres, 2002, p. 51)

For Habermas, the absence of this kind of ongoing discourse exacerbates what he refers to as the boundary-crises between systems and lifeworlds. Lifeworlds are given shape through the media of value commitments and influence. These lifeworld media are qualitative, and enacted and reaffirmed in communication. Systems, on the other hand, refer to those features of modern society concerned with material reproduction, where commitments to efficiency, predictability, and control are paramount. Formal organizations and institutional arrangements can be understood thus. The media through which systems are structured are economic and administrative in nature, and represented through the overt and hidden dimensions of power. Significantly, these express but do not generate the value commitments and influence of lifeworlds (Frank, 2000). Since value commitments and influence are borne out of communicative action in lifeworlds, a system's legitimacy depends on the lifeworld. Ideally, then, communicative action in the lifeworld makes possible the formation, affirmation and regeneration of a community's value commitments and integrative influence, which are then manifested through systems of material reproduction.

A central concern for Habermas is the un-coupling of systems and lifeworlds, which he links to the 'colonization' of lifeworlds by the imperatives of economic and political-legal systems (see Kemmis, 2001). As possibilities and spaces for communicative action are depleted, system institutions and media become increasingly divorced from the requisite legitimization on the part of the lifeworld. Such withdrawal of legitimation contributes to a range of maladies, including loss of meaning, unsettling of collective identity, alienation, and psychopathologies.

While claiming its share of critics, Habermas's theorization offers important insights to those of us after an emancipatory, rather than resignatory, critical theory (McCarthy, 1984). It helps us to consider the opening of communicative space as a principal task of action researchers, and reminds us that central to this task is a critical awareness of and attention to the obstacles that get in the way of dialogue. Habermas's theorizing can be experienced as highly intellectualized

and, by some, as ponderous, so in the remainder of this article, and through this special issue, we attempt to bring these abstract concepts to life, and to illustrate aspects of action research practice through a review of some of the key challenges, opportunities, and paradoxes which emerge in the early stages of action research projects.

## **Communicative space in first-, second- and third-person practice**

We have elsewhere (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b, 2008; Reason & Torbert, 2001) suggested that it is helpful to see three broad pathways for action research practice: first-person in personal reflective practice, second-person in relation to a face-to-face community, and third-person where the community of practice is too wide for face-to-face communication and one is seeking to contribute to the development of a social movement (see also Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Gustavsen, 2003; Gustavsen, Hansson, & Qvale, 2008). The challenge of opening communicative space is primarily an issue for second- and third-person inquiry. One might well argue that there is a requirement for some kind of internal meditative and reflective space for first-person work to successfully take place (for which see *Action Research* special issue on first-person inquiry, Marshall & Mead, 2005), but here we are concerned with communicative space between persons and within communities. While we shall focus on opening communicative space in second-person practice, we will touch on some of the issues that arise in larger scale action research endeavours in the hope that this will stimulate further consideration by colleagues in the future.

## **Opening communicative space through the lens of interpersonal needs**

Second-person inquiry can be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, in practices such as co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001; Reason & Riley, 2007) an explicit agreement is sought to engage in mutual inquiry, either with an existing group or a group drawn together for a particular inquiry process. In contrast, a process of mutual inquiry can evolve from and within everyday conversations in the manner that Shaw describes as ‘changing conversations in organizations’ (Shaw, 2002). While in co-operative inquiry an initiating researcher often will propose a topic for inquiry, invite co-researchers to join, and initiate them into the inquiry process (e.g. McArdle, 2002), thus in formality and explicitness mimicking aspects of the ‘system’, Shaw suggests we look to the possibilities for inquiry ‘in the sheer flowing ubiquity of the com-

municative dance in which we are all engaged' (2002, p. 10). With similar intention Marshall and Reason (2008) have written of 'taking an attitude of inquiry' and the 'underlying and continual challenge of living in the world as a question' (2008, p. 62) as a necessary companion to the more procedural side of action research. Both place more emphasis on starting inquiry from engagement in the lifeworld of those involved. These two approaches are of course not exclusive, for a co-operative inquiry group can evolve out of the conversational process; and a co-operative inquiry group will ideally become more 'conversational' as it develops over time, as we shall see below; and further may take its inquiry out from the group space into the everyday 'communicative dance'.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these differences of emphasis we can see in both approaches that opening communicative space involves creating an arena for the expression of interpersonal needs and the development of social contexts in which these needs are met (and frustrated). Schutz's (1958, 1994) longstanding interpersonal theory, describing needs for inclusion, control and intimacy, has been integrated into frameworks of group development. Early concerns are for inclusion and membership (*Who am I to be in this group? Will I belong? And will the group meet my personal and practical needs?*). When and if these needs are adequately satisfied the group focuses on concerns for power and influence (*Who has power and who is powerless? Can I join with others to gain power and influence to meet my needs?*). And if these are successfully negotiated they give way to concerns for intimacy and diversity in which flexible and tolerant relationships enable individuals to realize their own identity and the group to be effective in relation to its task (*Who are we together in this group space? How do our needs and abilities complement each other? How effective are we?*). This phase progression model of group behaviour – in which the group's primary concern moves from issues of inclusion to control to intimacy (Srivastva, Obert, & Neilson, 1977); or from forming to norming to storming to performing (Tuckman, 1965); or from nurturing to energizing to relaxing (Randall & Southgate, 1980) – positions opening communicative space as an aspect of group development. (Of course, every group manifests these principles in their own unique way and the complexity of an unfolding group process will always exceed what can be said about it.)

If these interpersonal needs are adequately met, social interaction will likely lead to task accomplishment; if not, individuals and the group may become overwhelmed with anxiety in the manner thoroughly explored by Bion (1959), who in his psychoanalytically oriented exploration of group process describes these as 'basic assumptions': the group behaves 'as if' it is gathered to meet some unacknowledged and unconscious needs. The healthy need for inclusion becomes expressed as *dependence and counterdependence*; the need for adequate control over one's destiny becomes *fight and flight*; and the need for intimacy becomes expressed in *pairing*, which Bion described as a messianic hope that some one or some couple will arrive to save the group from itself.

It is more likely that a space will be opened in which something like Habermas's principles of communicative action can be practised if the group is facilitated toward the developmental path, and far less likely if it becomes a basic assumption group. The developmental path is more likely to articulate and legitimize the shared lifeworld of participants. In contrast, however well intentioned, action research projects that are programmatic, designed and initiated from outside and imposed on participants, will be more likely to emphasize system requirements over lifeworld; they will result at best in what Randall and Southgate (1980) describe as an intermediate group.

Drawing on Randall and Southgate we can suggest that, at each stage, the initiating action researcher, facilitator or animator needs to attend to task, to organization, and to the emotional quality of interaction. How this is accomplished will vary from group to group: here we can only sketch out the requirements and review some examples, to which interested readers are pointed for further detail.

## **The inclusion phase**

### *Emotional issues*

As a new group meets or an existing group gathers under new circumstances, many will be asking, 'Who will I be in this group? Will I belong?' If the system influence is strong they may wonder if they are free to choose their identity or whether it will be imposed. The challenge here is to help people feel free, comfortable and able to contribute, while at the same time providing a sense of challenge and stimulation. This can be particularly challenging where some people bring experiences of being disempowered.

### *Task issues*

A second question at this stage revolves around the purposes of the group and is expressed in questions such as 'Will this group meet my needs and will I be able to contribute?' and 'Will we be free to follow our own purposes?' This requires a sufficient clear framing of the inquiry task so that participants can grasp the purpose of the group, while being sufficiently open that they can make it their own.

### *Organizational issues*

Participants will be wondering what kinds of time and other commitments the inquiry will demand; whether they will be able to fit it into their (often already busy) lives; how it will fit with system requirements. Attention needs to be paid to how to fit the inquiry process into the particular pattern of everyday activities.



These inclusion oriented activities start from the first contact and can take several weeks or even months. Rushing too quickly into establishing an inquiry group is nearly always a mistake. Lesley Treleaven, following the injunction 'If you want something to happen, make a space for it', describes how she carefully made a collaborative inquiry space for women in what she describes as a masculine oriented organization, drawing both formally on her role as Staff Development manager and informally on her peer identity as a woman in the organization. She emphasizes the need for the preparatory phase of the inquiry 'to be congruent with collaborative processes and grounded in responses to exploratory dialogue' (Treleaven, 1994, p. 142), and writes that, since she knew that collaborative inquiry 'could evoke anxiety with its lack of structure, excitement with its open-endedness, and uncertainty with its unpredictability':

I therefore spent a lot of time making initial contact with women personally or by phone, talking with them about their experiences as women working in the organization, sharing the patterns that I was making from these conversations, and exploring what a collaborative inquiry could offer them . . . actively listening and using language that expressed their own concerns and interests . . . (Treleaven, 1994, p. 144)

She writes about the recursive nature of the inquiry process, with 'every part of the inquiry process informing the next', and describes how she

. . . moved in the initiation phase from sending a written invitation for self-nomination, to a verbal invitation which women could accept or reject, to an exploratory dialogue which created participation in a space of inquiry. As I engaged in numerous conversations with women individually, I was able to develop my understanding of what I heard . . . (Treleaven, 1994, pp. 144–145)

In the early stages, the creation of appropriate physical space can be important. People cannot feel comfortable if their physical well-being is not looked after, and it is surprising how often meetings of all kinds are conducted in places that are physically uncomfortable and culturally strange, where people cannot see and hear each other.

Prajapeertu, a citizens' jury exploring food security in Andhra Pradesh, took place against a background of social, political and scientific controversy. The jury consisted of mainly non-literate farmers from all over the state. Rather than bring them together in a formal conference setting in a city, which would be familiar to the expert witnesses but uncomfortable for the jury, the organizers (local and international NGOs) took great trouble to construct a setting in a rural location which would feel comfortable to the jurors, while at the same time having the facilities for presentation of scenarios and recording the interaction that were necessary for the project (see Pimbert & Wakeford, 2003).

Michel Pimbert writes:

These safe communicative spaces are carefully thought-out environments of mutual support and empathy in which people, who might otherwise feel threatened by sharing their knowledge and experience with others, can feel free to express themselves. Safe communicative spaces are needed for the confrontation of perspectives from the social and natural sciences as well as the knowledge of local citizens, for social actors to negotiate and develop policy futures. (Pimbert, personal communication, 2008)

Kate McArdle initiated a co-operative inquiry with young women in management in a large multinational corporation. As part of the process of inviting women to consider joining she ran a series of introductory meetings. She describes the challenges of establishing the kind of setting she was after:

I arrived to find a beautiful conference room filled with large wooden tables arranged in a square, on top of which at regularly spaced intervals, were a mixture of mineral waters, glasses arranged in diamond shapes and small dishes of mints on paper doilies . . . I wanted a circle of chairs. I phoned Facilities to remove the tables. Two big men in overalls arrived and called Catering to come and move the mints and water . . . The men removed the tables and put the chairs back in a square. Then they all left and I was alone again. I wheeled the huge plush chairs into a circle and wondered what the women would think when they arrived . . . The structure seemed symbolic of the un-normalness of what I was going to propose we join each other in doing and it helped me to communicate this non-verbally. (McArdle, 2002, p. 182)

## The control phase

If the inclusion phase is adequately negotiated, group members will feel sufficient confidence to challenge each other and the leadership: differences will arise about purpose, process and method, and the exploration and resolution of these differences are part of what creates an effective group (Srivastva et al., 1977).

### *Emotional issues*

It remains important to maintain sufficient safety for differences to be expressed strongly without group members feeling frightened that things may fall apart completely.

### *Task issues*

Early agreements about the nature of the inquiry task to hand are likely to be challenged. It is through the struggle to articulate and find agreement at a deeper and more encompassing level that much important work can be done in understanding the issues to hand. In Habermas's terms, some participants may be more influenced by system definitions of task, others seeking strongly to articulate life-world.

*Organizational issues*

Conflict often emerges about the practical arrangements for meeting, about the place, timing, refreshments and so on. Though often important points are raised, this may also disguise conflict at a deeper level which group members are not yet able to articulate.

Sometimes differences are raised in ways that feel premature and therefore unhelpful. In a preliminary meeting organized with doctors to reach agreement on the form and content of a co-operative inquiry into the theory and practice of holistic medicine (Heron & Reason, 1985; Reason, 1988) one of the potential participants, a large and confident man, expressed the view, 'Of course, I am the only person in the room who is truly practicing holistic medicine'. This clearly had the potential to silence less confident participants and damage the slowly emerging culture of collaboration we had been nurturing.

Later, the group was able to contain much more sustained and emotional expression of difference. As facilitators, we invited the group to explore their emotional responses to the process of exploring their professional practice, working on the assumption that this would likely be repressed (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). In an 'encounter group' session established for this purpose, a participant expressed his unhappiness, and encouraged to explore this more fully, began to discover his rage at the medical profession. He remembered that as a bright boy from the north of England he had gone to medical school in London full of ambitions to serve his community. But his working-class accent has been laughed at; his ambitions to serve swamped by the norms of the medical profession; and he had become a comfortable middle-aged and middle-class doctor who had lost all sense of meaning in his work. 'I hate fucking doctors!' he shouted repeatedly, alternating between anger and grief. Group members were deeply moved by this, reminded of their own feelings toward their profession, and recognized some of the tensions built into their professional role. The incident led the group into an in-depth exploration of the tensions (system versus lifeworld) inherent in the role of doctor in our society.

Even after 50 years of action research practice, most people feel that 'research' is something done in universities by elite academics; the idea of being a co-researcher who can creatively address issues of concern to oneself and one's community is still uncommon. Visiting participatory research projects in Bangladesh with Yoland Wadsworth at the invitation of Research Initiatives Bangladesh in 2004, Peter was struck by the pride with which women and men described themselves as *gonogobeshona* – 'peoples' researchers' – who were contributing to a deeper understanding of their situation and to improving their shared practices in family life, farming and other economic activities, and in a wider political engagement. The issues they were addressing were far from superficial, as Wadsworth describes:

We then arrived at a village at which there was a PAR meeting taking place which we were able to watch and observe. Despite the language translation issues, it was clear that it was both well-attended by seemingly most villagers, facilitated by a non-dominating animator, and seemed to operate as a safe-enough ‘container’ for the raising of delicate matters, including the power-knowledge relations between men and women. It appeared to me that the exchanges between men and women were quite frank and met with less-defensive explanation than I might have expected. And then, even more impressively, these were followed by the asking of further questions of the women by the men, or vice versa . . . The facilitator appeared to take a respectful and largely non invasive/non interventive role of carefully recording people’s words. This left people free to take more of the initiative for the dialogue – including continuing it through any less-helpful questions or observations. The session ended with what seemed to be a relatively good-hearted singing of an old women’s liberation song by all present. (Wadsworth, 2005, p. 431)

### The intimacy phase

It might be said that communicative space is not fully open until the group develops qualities of interdependence in which each member finds their identity confirmed and complemented by all other identities (Srivastva et al., 1977) so that the lifeworld of each person and the collective can be fully articulated.

Some of this quality can be seen in a women’s food co-op inquiry group exploring experiences of poverty with which Stephanie Baker Collins worked closely as part of her PhD research. Baker Collins parallels Habermas by contrasting ‘functional participation’ characterized by predetermined objectives with ‘interactive participation’ in which the group takes control over decision-making:

The general atmosphere of mistrust within the co-op was contrasted by the atmosphere of trust and enthusiastic participation that developed among the women who participated in the small group . . . In the first several meetings, the small group followed an agenda which had been introduced by the researcher. This format began to change, as the group gained confidence in their own voice and their familiarity with each other. (Baker Collins, 2005, p. 15)

Baker Collins describes how the quality of interaction changes through the early meetings. The third meeting included:

. . . a general and wide-ranging discussion of life on social assistance. Several personal stories were shared about cutbacks, overpayment rulings and subsequent deductions, and fear of losing an asset such as an inherited house. This was the first of numerous discussions about life on social assistance. By the fourth meeting, the group set the agenda together at the beginning of the meeting or in planning for the next meeting. (Baker Collins, 2005, p. 16)

As is often the case, a group at these later stages expresses its sense of shared identity, evidenced here by the women ‘expressing and implementing a desire to include a social and celebrative aspect to their time together’ (Baker Collins, 2005, p. 16), and by their unanimous decision to continue meeting.

Michelle Fine and Maria Torre describe the quality of interaction in ‘PAR behind bars’ working to create a ‘college in a prison’ programme for women in a maximum security prison (Fine & Torre, 2006). Working with women to ‘craft the research questions, challenge each other to assure that varied standpoints are represented . . . , work through the specifics of design, data collection, analysis and products’ (2006, p. 257):

We created what bell hooks would call a ‘space of radical openness . . . a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk. One needs a community . . .’. (1984, p. 149)

We were such a community. The most obvious divide among us was free or imprisoned, but . . . the structures and waterfalls of white supremacy and global capital had washed over our biographies and marked us quite differently.

Usually our differences enriched us. Sometimes they distinguished us. At moments they separated us . . . We had hard conversations about ‘choice’. Those of us from The Graduate Center were much more likely to speak about structural explanations of crime and mass incarceration, while the women in the prison were stitching together a language of personal agency, social responsibility and individual choice(s) within structural inequities . . . These conversations and differences had everything to do with privilege, surviving institutionalization, and waking up (or not) to the images of bodies/screams in your past. (Fine & Torre, 2006, pp. 259–260)

We have in the last section shown how the process of opening communicative space can be mapped onto a theory of group development that suggests a progression through phases of inclusion, control, and intimacy; and we have illustrated these through published accounts of action research. As with any theory, this is an idealized account of both group process and of opening communicative space. It is important to note that no group moves perfectly through the three phases: unfinished business always remains from earlier phases which may trip up the process at later stages. Indeed, intimations of later stages are nearly always present right from the beginning (if we did not carry in our hearts the hope and possibility of an intimate and effective working group we would likely remain as hermits). These issues are explored more fully in the literature on group development; Jenny Mackewn (2008) explores issues of facilitation as action research.

## Communicative space in a third-person context

While at the level of second-person inquiry opening communicative space can be seen in terms of group development, this is at the cost of ignoring the context in which the inquiry is taking place. All the examples above are significantly influenced by their institutional context – rural agriculture, a multinational corporation, the UK National Health Service, a village in Bangladesh, a food co-op, a prison. As Coleman and Gearty (2007) point out, it is possible to create a bounded and distinctive inquiry space, but this nearly always requires external as well as internal validation which creates both opportunities and demands.

Between 2005 and 2008 a consortium led by the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) at the University of Bath engaged in an action research programme for the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) called Connect4Cymru (C4C). The overall purpose of the programme was to develop a more creative and responsive public service for Wales, and to develop the abilities of individual managers to take initiatives and work across institutional boundaries. The programme was designed so that managers from public service institutions in Wales worked in eight to ten ‘action inquiry groups’ focused on a particular strategic issue for WAG. These groups met together periodically in what we called ‘whole system events’ with the purpose of linking the groups and developing a culture of change within Welsh public service. The principles that underpinned the programme were the fullest articulation to date of the practices CARPP had developed (see Coleman & Gearty, 2007).<sup>2</sup>

‘Opening communicative space’ in such a context involves interaction and conflict between system and lifeworld. CARPP won the contract in the face of strong competition after a highly formal process, and CARPP itself is a university research centre which adds to the formality of the process. In making the bid it was necessary to couch the programme in ‘system’ terms that would be congruent with the expectations of the funders: we had to show how it would contribute to meeting the strategic objectives of WAG and was congruent with a number of public documents assessing the needs to public service in Wales; and for the university that it would contribute to the Centre’s public research profile. As we grew more familiar with WAG and its ambitions our understanding and appreciation grew and we felt ourselves appropriately in service of worthwhile purposes, particularly as the thematic content of the action inquiry groups increasingly moved towards issues of environmental sustainability and social justice.

As we worked with the groups, and engaged in the lifeworlds of participants, we came to understand the nature of the contradictions between participant perspectives and the requirements we had agreed to work toward through our contracting. Many were highly competent and dedicated, but found the contradictions between the statements espoused by the system (about encouraging initiative, flexibility, cross institutional collaboration and so on) at odds with

their experience of day-to-day management and resourcing priorities. We can explore these tensions in terms of the five dimensions of action research identified by Reason and Bradbury (2001a).

### *Practical outcomes*

The system demands (as articulated by its representatives in politicians and senior management) were for demonstrable progress toward identified policy goals substantiated by conventional (usually quantitative) evidence. For participants, the issues of concern related to these policy goals but were both broader and more immediate, expressed in terms of their experienced ability to contribute effectively within the constraints of large bureaucratic systems within which they felt relatively powerless, often because of resource constraints.

### *Participation*

System representatives strongly espoused ‘participation’ and ‘agency’; what was often implied, however, might be described as ‘participative conformity’: an active contribution within the taken for granted norms of public service rather than participation that would disturb the status quo. Participants, as they engaged in the programme, increasingly saw their participation in much more idiosyncratic ways, realizing that to make any significant contribution they would have to risk stepping outside day-to-day norms and ‘make waves’.

### *Human flourishing*

This was seen in system terms as the achievement of strategic political goals; from a participant perspective, in terms of making the work life more satisfying by making practical contributions to more immediate, and to them more significant, issues. Indeed, it became clear that many participants brought a sense of intent and purpose to their work which was more expansive than that mandated by the public service system (for example, in their focus on biodiversity).

### *Many ways of knowing*

The emphasis of the system representatives was based in their experience at a political level in the system and tended to be abstracted as propositional knowing expressed in policy documents. For participants, their experience was of day-to-day frustrations and difficulties of working within a large system, the contradictory requirements, and the lack of time to think. At the same time, some of the groups made a point of connecting directly with features of biodiversity – including salmon, kites, landscapes, mountains, and coast – as backdrop and container

to their work. Access to these kinds of experiences was important, as was storytelling from both the system and lifeworld perspectives.

### *Emergence*

For the system, emergence is seen as a logical progression through problem identification through to solution. In the experience of participants (and facilitators) the programme at its best developed in more organic ways as they themselves got to grips with the inquiry approach, identified the issues they wished to address, developed supportive relationships with their colleagues in the inquiry group, and began to engage in cycles of action and reflection that had meaning for them.

These tensions were evidenced at the final whole system event at which the inquiry groups presented an account of their activities to each other and to a panel of senior management. The presentations were on the whole lively and imaginative and reflected the challenges and rewards, successes and failures of attempting to contribute to public service in new ways. They were received rather unenthusiastically and critically by the panel members who looked for hard evidence of achievements against clear goals.

These tensions were not always irreconcilable, but were ongoing realities which we clearly underestimated in our design (for the second cycle we proposed to add an action inquiry group composed of senior managers to moderate these tensions, but were not able to reach agreement on this). The tensions were recognized by both sides, with some system representatives and some participants coming together to realize that making serious contributions to change would be working within the paradox; the less creative and engaged on both sides were more cynical. At its best, the programme could be seen as a cycle: at the beginning there was a coming together of both system and lifeworld, a feeling that together we can make a difference; as participants got deeper into action research practice they recognized the challenges and restrictions the system imposed on them and were upset and discouraged by contradictory messages; later, as they reflected on the totality of their experience and experiments with different behaviours the more creative participants began to find ways to reconcile their lifeworld experiences with system requirements in ways that genuinely reflected the original objectives of the programme.

Working with the action inquiry groups was not just about opening a second-person inquiry space but about continually engaging with contradiction. As Geoff Mead discovered managing a similar programme, the amount of attention, energy, tact and skill involved in opening a communicative space that encompassed both system and lifeworld was extraordinary. Action researchers intending to manage large-scale projects would do well to study Mead's chapter,



and also Ann Martin's review of issues and practices of action research on a large scale (Martin, 2008; Mead, 2008).

### **Conclusion: The paradox and contradictions of communicative space**

We have described communicative space as being in that delicate place where the lifeworld meets the system, a liminal, in-between space where two opposing qualities meet. Rather like tidal wetlands where salt and fresh water mix, these are not restful places but continually changing and offering new possibilities and challenges. And, just as liminal spaces in natural ecologies offer specialist niches, communicative spaces offer possibilities of new forms of living relationship quite different from those which are solidly rooted in the system or the lifeworld.

The practices of opening communicative space are therefore necessarily paradoxical and contradictory: the facilitator often needs to hold together qualities that are usually seen as being in opposition. By way of conclusion we offer our incomplete list of such paradoxes, and point towards further reading and exemplars for those interested.

- Contracting: it is important to provide a sense of clear purpose early on, in the knowledge that this clarity will prove spurious and will need renegotiating as the inquiry proceeds, relationships develop and understanding deepens (see Bodorkós & Pataki, this issue).
- Boundaries: an inquiry group needs boundaries in order to open a safe communicative space; but if these boundaries are too firm the group will become isolated from its context (see Whitmore & McKee, 2001).
- Participation: all actors, including initiating action researchers, will have their own vision of 'participation' – and we need such a vision if we are to engage with others. Yes this vision can become a tyranny if not held lightly and flexibly (see Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, this issue; Gayá Wicks, 2006; Mullett et al., 2004).
- Leadership: animators and facilitators need to provide appropriate leadership and exercise social power in order to create the conditions in which participation can flourish; and they need to be able to relinquish power and step away from leadership so that participants can fully own their work (see Chowns, 2008; Marshall, 2004; Nolan, 2005).
- Anxiety: since all practices of inquiry stimulate anxiety (Devereaux, 1967) communicative spaces need to be able to contain anxiety so that it may be expressed (see Douglas, 2002; Hyland, this issue).
- Chaos and order: in similar fashion, since all inquiry in some sense disturbs established ways of seeing and doing, sufficient order is needed to contain necessary chaos and confusion (see Reason, 1999; Reason & Goodwin, 1999).

- Liberatory and practical orientations: action research is always poised between an intent to address and solve practical issues and its ambitions to liberate people from oppression and self delusion, which may raise interesting tensions, as indeed do dual aspirations towards action and inquiry (see Johansson & Lindhult, 2008).

## Articles in this issue

Daniela Arieli, Victor Friedman and Kamil Agbaria start us out by pointing to the relative dearth of studies dealing specifically with the building of the participative relationship itself. They address this gap by critically reflecting on a relationship between Jewish researchers and a Palestinian Arab NGO in Israel, which failed to live up to the initiating action researchers' espoused values of participation. The article provides a thoughtful overview of some of the key issues and tensions involved in opening communicative space, elaborating on the paradox of participation. It proposes a theory of action through which collaborators in action research may deal with this paradox more effectively.

John Newton and Helen Goodman draw on a case study of a complex inter-organizational project to theorize that opening communicative space requires attention to issues of affectivity, and to the holding of an emotional space where people are able to connect symbiotically with each other. The authors argue that systems psychodynamic theory may help action researchers to create the conditions for mutuality which are necessary both for critical examination of systems and for health and coherence at the lifeworld level, on which system functionality depends.

Barbara Bodorkós and György Pataki's practical account of opening communicative space also reflects on some of the paradoxes inherent within such attempts. Reporting on a participatory action research project aimed at facilitating bottom-up planning and development in a socio-economically disadvantaged region of Hungary, the authors highlight that before a PAR project can engage with silenced, under-privileged communities, it can be necessary to legitimize such development work in the eyes of decision-makers and power-holders. They point to the tensions and difficulties involved in attempting to break away from prevailing structural inequalities in such situations.

Finally, Nora Hyland's article provides a rich account of the ways in which communicative spaces were opened, contested, closed, and reconfigured within a racially mixed elementary school, as staff investigated race and racism in their own practices in relation to their primarily African American students and families. The article highlights the challenges to communicative space inherent within the examination of difficult topics like race and racism, in doing so elaborating on the paradoxes of anxiety, leadership, and contracting highlighted earlier.

## Notes

- 1 We are grateful to Catherine Rushforth who articulates the link between co-operative inquiry and Shaw's notion of conversations in her Masters thesis (Rushforth, 2009).
- 2 This description and analysis of the Connect4Cymru programme is written by Peter Reason in consultation with other members and associates of CARPP who were involved.

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