

The Friendly Outsider

From AR as a Research Strategy to the Skills Needed to Become an Action Researcher

The lens in the previous chapter was focused on the local stakeholders; here we emphasize the professional researcher more. As always in action research (AR), however, the two are always linking through cogenerative learning processes.

Not Trying to Overcome an Unruly World

As we defined it earlier, action research is a cogenerative process through which professional researchers and interested members of a local organization, community, or a specially created organization collaborate to research, understand, and resolve problems of mutual interest. AR is a social process in which professional knowledge, local knowledge, process skills, research skills, and democratic values are the basis for cogenerated knowledge and social change.

Conventional researchers attempt to make a sharp separation between a research design that they determine in advance of initiating the research and endeavor to control throughout the research (carefully noting any deviations from the original plan) and the analysis of results of the research, which are developed and reported largely after the research actions are completed. Conventional researchers seldom take on the responsibility of producing socially applicable research results or being involved in the application of their research. Some do claim that their research is useful because all improvements in social knowledge are useful or because the topics they study are socially important.

These behaviors lead us to believe that for conventional researchers, the world appears to be an unruly place that attempts to fool them into believing what is not true. Their response to this unruly world is to do all they can to gain control of its unruliness through reliance on impersonal techniques of data

generation and manipulation and through self-discipline. Research techniques are important insofar as they impart control, distance, and objectivity to the researcher so that any other similarly motivated researcher can reproduce the same results using the same techniques.

Action researchers reject this view on a variety of grounds. Although many action researchers recognize how easy it is to believe whatever we prefer about the world, we do not accept that it is possible to separate the research process from its human dimensions or to separate the process from the results. AR seeks to bring the process and the results into the closest possible relationship, and builds research on fundamental respect for and trust in human capacities. AR also emphasizes democratic values and processes by co-creating knowledge applicable by the local stakeholders in their efforts to increase control over their own situations.

Creating Possibilities Rather Than Reinforcing Limits

The dominant imagery in conventional social research comes, for very good historical and political economic reasons, from the language of bureaucratic organizations. These organizations constantly seek control, objectivity, classification, and replicability, all essential features of a bureaucratic and authoritarian mindset. But before we go too far down this line, it is worth remembering that bureaucracy, despite fashionable antibureaucratic ideologies in academia, is, among other things, an embodiment of attempts to build public structures and decision-making criteria on an abstract notion of social justice. Rather than making decisions about allocation of public resources on personalistic grounds, bureaucrats were supposed to develop objective criteria for classifying clients and problems in such a way that the allocation of public resources was beyond the reach of personal choice. By developing and employing "impartial" norms and methods, bureaucrats were supposed to make fair and unbiased decisions on important issues and allocate social resources justly. The vastness of the failure of this attempt hardly needs emphasis in a world of international cartels, war profiteers, and pork barrel politics, but it nevertheless left an indelible imprint on conventional social science.

Underlying the ideology and practices of bureaucracy are notions that humans are strongly given to self-deception and that the unruly world has to be brought under rational control. Bureaucrats are taught to set themselves apart from other people, using their rational minds to solve problems that others react to personally and emotionally. They also accept radical differences in social power and intellectual ability, with bureaucrats having the power and resources, their clients being active only in as much as they must press their claims for assistance. This bureaucratic ideology mirrors the basic belief system and professional practices of conventional social research.

Action researchers reject this framework on theoretical, methodological, political, and moral grounds. On theoretical grounds, action researchers assert that those who face social problems have much of the information and analytical capacity needed to solve them. Action researchers attribute much more weight to the knowledge of local people than do conventional researchers or bureaucrats. Action researchers are deeply skeptical about the transcendence of professional knowledge over all other forms of knowing and that “Father/Mother knows best.”

Methodologically, action researchers argue that shared decision making about methods, collaborative case analysis, and teaching analytical techniques to a group of research partners produces superior research results in the quality and amount of information gathered and in the depth and quality of the analyses made. Politically, action researchers argue that research results should be useful for the local partners in gaining increased control over their own situations and that the research questions should be influenced by all parties involved in the research. Morally, action researchers reject the imposition of research on other human beings. We do not believe that social research is a professional right. We promote research methods that enable nonprofessional researchers to enhance their own control over their lives and their social situations.

AR thus is a process comanaged by the interested parties, not a technique applied by a professional researcher to other people. This means that action researchers visualize research processes in unique ways and use these visualizations to help keep the processes moving in useful directions without imposing an overall direction from above. One of the visualizations of this kind of process that best captures our collective experience of AR is that provided by the French biologist, François Jacob (1982), in his book *The Possible and the Actual*.

Jacob (1982), one the foremost evolutionary biologists of the contemporary generation, was not writing about AR. He was trying to communicate to a general audience a clear sense of the open-ended, dynamic, and diversifying character of evolutionary processes and was criticizing the ever-present tendency to try to reduce evolution to some kind of preordained and directed optimal process. To this end, he wrote about evolution as a process built on a constant dialogue between the possible and the actual.

Jacob’s (1982) analysis of the physicochemical and biotic universe was built on the view that what exists at any moment in history always contains many fewer objects and beings than could possibly have existed. Although this may sound odd, it is quite logical. Jacob observed that physicochemical and organic matter are capable of yielding an immense number of possible combinations: all those that have existed and that currently exist, plus many more that are possible but have never existed.

The reasons why certain combinations exist or do not exist are fundamentally historical. History intervenes because, at each point in the Earth’s

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development, particular conditions exist. At those moments and under those conditions, only certain of the physicochemical or biotic capabilities of matter are acted on, leaving the other possibilities forever untouched in ongoing evolutionary processes. In other words, what happened simply is what happened, not everything that could have happened. As time goes on, only some of the new possibilities generated are acted on at the next turning points (or selection events, in biological parlance).

This argument is paralleled in the work of Latour (1987). An important claim Latour makes is that a fact becomes a fact when actors decide that it is true. This is conveyed through the metaphor of closing the black box, meaning that when and how the box is closed depends on which actors participate, their power and interests, and the context under which the box is closed. When the box is closed, the fact has become true. With new constellations of actors, the black box can be reopened and new "truths" or possibilities can be produced.

This perspective argues that the relationship between the possible and the actual is a historical and contingent relationship and that the history of the process itself is a causal agent. According to Jacob and the evolutionary biologists, our world is not Pangloss's best of all possible worlds, but rather a possible world that was actualized historically, leaving others unrealized. This is precisely what the concept of evolution means, despite repeated attempts to domesticate the notion by making it a directed, teleological process (see Greenwood, 1985).

Thus far, we have been discussing so-called blind evolutionary processes, that is, those in which self-aware beings have not intervened. When dealing with humans, the situation becomes more complicated, because the dialogue between the possible and the actual continues to operate but the human ability to conceptualize alternative pasts and futures opens up a much wider range of possible-actual relationships. Thus, the relationship between the past and the future in human affairs is a combination of the physicochemical and biotic possibilities and historical conditions and the variety of visions of the past and the potential futures that humans conceive as they determine the actions they will take.

Like other teleological, antievolutionary forces, bureaucratic control systems and existing power holders expressly attempt to gain control over the way the relationships between the past and future are conceptualized to be able to determine the direction the future will take. Against this, AR specifically aims to reopen the dialogue between the possible and the actual and to counter attempts by power holders and their bureaucratic agents to pretend that the future is predetermined. Thus, a core belief in AR is that there are always more possible futures than appear at first to be open, and thus there is a significant effort in all AR processes to reanalyze the past, projecting what happened against other possible outcomes, and a consequent division of the future into

what is likely to come about if no self-conscious action is taken and what other, possibly more desirable, futures may be available.

To be an action researcher is to believe that other, better situations are possible than those currently existing. Action researchers aim to reopen the possibilities for change, enhance a sense of responsibility for the direction of the future, and emphasize that human agency, not impartial control systems, is the centerpiece of social change. One consequence of this perspective is that action researchers do not “apply” techniques to a situation. Rather, we bring knowledge and skills to a group of people who collaboratively open up the possibilities for self-managed social change. Nearly all the AR approaches we discuss in this book, in one way or another and in very different languages, revolve around this basic vision.

Linking Theory and Local Understanding: Being Scientific, Counterintuitive, and Technically Competent

In conventional social research, expert knowledge is the basis of the high status of the researcher and his or her ability to impose controls and methods on a research situation. As we said in Chapters 6 and 7, action researchers obviously must have expert knowledge, but this knowledge is not treated as a source of unilateral power. Rather we view it as our contribution to a social situation in which we participate as contributing human agents.

The knowledge demands on an action researcher are heavy and keenly felt. To assist a group of collaborators in resolving some kind of important social problem, the action researcher must have some kind of substantive appreciation of the particular issues involved. If the problem is a polluting industry, the action researcher must know or learn about the industry, the pollution, and some of the possible solutions. Unlike the case of the conventional social researcher who systematically distrusts local knowledge, however, this contextual knowledge is not a unilateral responsibility of the professional expert. The action researcher can and must rely on local knowledge to a considerable degree.

The local interested parties have a great deal of information (or access to such information) about what is going on and long experience with their situation. Action researchers actively seek out this knowledge as an element in the research process. This contrasts strongly with conventional researchers' claim that the universal applicability of their research methods and techniques makes such substantive knowledge minor and considered an unreliable and co-opted source of information.

Precisely because the outcomes of an AR project are likely to be applied in specific human situations, the action researcher must master the scientific method. Perhaps AR has an even higher standard to meet here, because

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conventional social research rarely entertains responsibility for the application of its results to human situations.

Professional action researchers must be adept in the use of the scientific method with its insistence on the systematic attempt to discover the unexpected and counterintuitive explanations often hidden from view by assumptions and other elements in cultural training and social systems. This is one fundamental contribution that the action researcher makes to an AR situation. The ability to ask counterintuitive questions, to approach issues from the “outside,” and to question pet explanations is a role that the action researcher must know how to play well.

The action researcher must also bring a set of analytical frameworks to the process—among them, views on political economy, social structure, discursive strategies, change processes, and ideology. These analytical frameworks are important to the conceptualization of the relationships between the past and the possible futures. Some work in the social sciences has developed perspectives and methods that can assist in making these structures clear, and action researchers must be knowledgeable about them.

All humans have views about all of the matters mentioned. Such views are necessary equipment for living, and they form part of local knowledge. Social science research adds some analytical techniques and comparative frameworks that are generally unavailable or not often entertained in local knowledge systems. Having analyzed these matters from around the world and over long periods of time, professional researchers have developed a sense of where the local systems fit into a larger range of variation. This broader contextualization is useful in AR because many groups suffering from acute problems feel stuck in a particular view of the situation and have a difficult time developing a sense of alternative courses of action. By setting the local situation in the context of these broader comparisons, a professional action researcher can assist the local group in opening up its sense of the situation and some options for the future.

Though we strongly believe that the views on political economy, social structure, and ideological systems that professional action researchers bring to local situations are of critical importance, we do not believe that there is one correct approach to each of these subjects that is monopolized by the professionals. We, the authors, have our own views on these matters, but we recognize that there are many different kinds of analyses of political economy (Marxist, neo-Marxist, Gramscian, neoclassical, reformist, revolutionary, trade unionist, and so on), just as there are of social structures (Parsonian, constructivist, and so on) and ideational systems (structuralist, deconstructivist, constructivist, and so on).

Though no one system of analysis is correct, some approaches can make no meaningful contribution to AR. Frameworks that are blind to the play of economic and social power or triumphalist about the overall beneficent direction of history have no place in AR. The analysis of power relations, the

role of ideology, and the direction of history necessarily animate all AR projects and must be on any research agenda as problematic phenomena to be dealt with.

Practices and Skills of the Action Researcher

Up till now we have portrayed the situation of the professional action researchers in fairly abstract terms. From here forward, we become more concrete.

KNOWING HOW, TACIT KNOWLEDGE, REFLECTION-IN-ACTION, REFLECTION-ON-ACTION

Academia generally trades on a narrow notion of competence and expertise that limits intellectual capacities and training. AR challenges this position, building on a long tradition of philosophical discourse about skills, competence, and knowing. Gilbert Ryle (1949) argues for an important distinction between *knowing what* and *knowing how*. Knowing what is the main activity of conventional intellectual life in academia, and stresses the ability to know why a certain issue exists and what its definition is. A competent expert in knowing what is one who verbally can argue in favor of what he or she thinks, not one who knows how to do anything in particular.

Ryle (1949) rejects this framework by arguing that intelligence is more manifest in the way we act than in the way we think. Knowing how is manifest in intelligent actions that apply whatever capacities and knowledge a person has; it emerges through the application of knowledge in a given context. The definition of competence and expertise is knowing how to do something appropriately.

Framing the issue this way, Ryle (1949) anticipated and laid the groundwork for later efforts on the subject of competence. For example, the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1964, 1966) argues that competence is gained through the tacit dimensions of human behavior. Human beings know a great deal more than we can put into words, and unspoken (tacit) knowledge is a key component in competent human action.

Polanyi's (1964, 1966) most powerful illustration focuses on how children are able to learn to speak. If we limit ourselves to a view of knowledge as only expressible in language, then, by definition, children would be unable to learn to speak. Polanyi resolves this problem by arguing that language conveys only part of what we perceive and know and that another, major part of our knowledge is expressed in our actions. Thus, children learn initially from tacit knowledge, which eventually permits them to join the community of language speakers, though they always retain the tacit dimension as well.

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Building on this framework, we conceptualize the complex activities underlying intelligent actions as human skills, complex combinations of knowing how, tacit knowledge, and other kinds of knowledge (knowing what, language, and so on). We believe that conventional academic knowledge (knowing what) about AR is important for future practitioners, but we assert that such knowledge is never sufficient to train an AR practitioner.

Given this framework, we argue that skills are a fundamentally necessary component of AR and that they emerge only through intelligent actions, not merely from abstract and passive intellectualization. At the same time, we emphasize that skills can and must be developed. We do not believe that such skills are inherited human traits. Throughout life, all humans develop new and enhanced skills. A central aim of this book is to support the development of skills for AR practitioners. Skills in AR are certainly based on intellectual mastery of concepts (called by some “theory”), but skills express themselves in actions taken to facilitate AR processes, and the process and skills focus is an essential part of learning about AR.

In this regard, we strongly support the perspectives on reflective practice developed by Donald Schön (1983, 1987, 1991). In his work, Schön introduces the concept of reflective practice to analyze the way in which professional competence is developed through training. Focusing on the analysis of a number of teacher-student interactions, he develops a conceptual apparatus that highlights the role of linked reflection and praxis in the development of professional skills. Knowledge is not imparted simply through the passage of concepts from a teacher to a student, but rather through the interactions between them and their collaborative efforts to solve certain problems together through their actions.

Schön’s (1983, 1987, 1991) argument is directly in line with Ryle’s (1949) knowing how and Polanyi’s (1964, 1966) notions about tacit knowledge, but he takes the issue farther because he is concerned with how to educate these reflective practitioners. These concerns are stimulated both by his readings of John Dewey and psychoanalytic theory and by his long experience in organizational consulting. Schön’s response is to identify two reflective processes. The first is “reflection-in-action,” the ability to mirror a reflective process in the action itself that is a way of assessing actions in the process of acting. The second is “reflection-on-action,” consisting of working through experiences gained from actions after the fact. Both of these processes are greatly enhanced when the professional is engaged with other people in interactions in which mutual reflections are used to enhance understanding. Schön develops his arguments about reflection-in-action much more thoroughly than his views on reflection-on-action.

As a result, in developing and presenting his framework, Schön privileges the master-apprentice relationship as a key means of improving the

professional's skills. Working with an experienced master, following him or her through daily work processes, and engaging together in reflective processes, the apprentice accesses the master's skills as they are embodied and explicated in actions. This is accompanied by the dialogical processes of reflection between master and apprentice.

One consequence is that skillful actions are not developed in isolation. We agree that a logical first step in acquiring skills can be the gathering of intellectual knowledge by reading texts and taking classes, the road usually open to university students. But this is only a beginning phase in a much longer process. The development of expert AR skills is a process involving many stages.

Over the years, Levin has run several Ph.D. programs training graduate students to do AR. The main idea in all this training has been to combine theoretical knowing with practical skills in knowing how. The way to achieve this has been to have students work with experienced researchers. Projects are run with students working with senior faculty. They share the responsibility for the project and engage the research issues together. These professor-student dyads are further combined in a group structure that creates a community of action researchers colearning and developing skills together.

These relationships are more complex than a master-apprentice dyad might suggest. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) list five stages in the development of expert skills: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. Skillful human activity gradually reaches different levels, and practitioners operate differently on each of these levels. The novice follows analytical rules applied without much recognition of context and, like the conventional researcher, feels detached from the process. Gradually, the ability to read a context and to understand possible implications for actions moves the novice practitioner to the level of advanced beginner. Building on one's own experience is key to this development; a history of actions taken is much more important as a source of learning than the forms of explicit and analytical communication so prized in academia.

A competent practitioner has the ability to shift between context-free (for example, analytical) and contextual components in a particular intervention situation, but her or his involvement in the activity is limited to trying to influence the outcome. Finally, an expert bases professional activity on full involvement in the local situation and makes many suggestions on the basis of experientially informed intuitions about reasonable options drawn from previous work: "Intuition or know-how, as we understand it, is neither wild guessing nor supernatural inspiration, but the sort of ability we all use all the time as we go about our everyday task" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, p. 29). Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (1986) developmental schema is summarized in Table 8.1.

Whether or not we accept the particular models of skill development in Schön (1983, 1987, 1991) or Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), we want to be

Table 8.1 Stages of Skills Acquisition

<i>Skill Level</i>	<i>Components</i>	<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Decision</i>	<i>Commitment</i>
Novice	Context-free	None	Analytical	Detached
Advanced beginner	Context-free and situational	None	Analytical	Detached
Competent	Context-free and situational	Chosen	Analytical	Detached understanding and deciding. Involved in outcome
Proficient	Context-free and situational	Experienced	Analytical	Involved understanding Detached deciding
Expert	Context-free and situational	Experienced	Intuitive	Involved

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clear that such skills are a major component in the competence necessary to become a good AR practitioner. Professional practice involves more than explicit rules imparted abstractly in academic settings. Knowledge is context bound, intuition and tacit knowledge play important roles, and the acquisition of skill is mainly achieved through reflection in and on action. Learning from one's own experience is a core element in the development of AR practitioner skills, and there is no substitute for it.

The Friendly Outsider

In addition to the general orientation to skills we have articulated, we wish to point briefly to certain specific skills that AR practitioners must master to be effective. A professional action researcher must know how to be “the

friendly outsider.” This role is vital in AR because the external perspective is a key element in opening up local group processes for change. But this outsider is friendly in a special sense. He or she must be able to reflect back to the local group things about them, including criticism of their own perspectives or habits, in a way that is experienced as supportive rather than negatively critical or domineering. Good professional action researchers achieve a balance of critique and support through a variety of actions, including direct feedback, written reflections, pointing to comparable cases, and citing cases from the professional literature where similar problems, opportunities, or processes have occurred.

The friendly outsider must also be expert at opening up lines of discussion, a kind of good Socratic teacher. Often local organizations or groups are either stuck in positions that have hardened or they have become pessimistic about the possibilities for change. A variety of methods, discussed in Part 3, is used to reopen the possibilities for change. Flexibility and opportunities for change are pointed out to local people, along with encouragement in the form of moral support and information from other cases where similar problems existed but change turned out to be possible.

Another key role of the friendly outsider is to make evident the tacit knowledge that guides local conduct. This can be in the form of critical reflections or supportive comments about the extent of local capabilities. The outsider, who is not used to the group and to the local scene, is ideally placed to notice this kind of tacit knowledge, whereas it is often invisible to insiders. Often this takes the form of encouraging local people to realize that they have a valuable store of knowledge that is relevant to solving the problems they face. Occasionally, it takes the form of criticism of particular local modes of thinking that cause groups to shut down or to cycle unproductively over issues without resolving them.

Related to this is the role of speaking the locally unspeakable. Local people, because of their history together, because of local social structure and economic relationships, or simply because of decorum, often are unable to tell each other uncomfortable things that they clearly are aware of. Human groups are like this everywhere (Argyris & Schön, 1996). No human group operates with every member giving every other member absolutely honest feedback, but social change processes require the development of more open feedback to generate possibilities for action in particular social arenas.

In this context, the friendly outsider does not speak up on every unspeakable matter. The effort is to seek out and examine those tacit agreements not to discuss certain things, the local silences that constitute obstacles to positive change for the issues at hand. This is a judgment the action researcher must make carefully. Too much feedback can block a group; too little can prevent the group from moving ahead.

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Another role of the friendly outsider is to help local people inventory and assess the local resources available for a change project. Although local people are far more expert about the local scene than the outsider will ever be, their history together can lead them to overlook some important resources for change. This may simply be a matter of not appreciating that they have a store of knowledge somewhere that they are not thinking about using. It may be the matter of insisting that a particular local person or group must be included in the process, despite a history of either bad relations or distrust. Sometimes this takes the form of the outsider insisting on the presence of representatives of opposed political factions or other kinds of ideological groups. Or it may require the outsider to insist on a better gender, class, or ethnic balance in the working group.

One of the outsider's principal resources in doing all this is precisely being an outsider. The outsider's links to the outside world—universities; state, national, and international agencies; unions; philanthropic groups; professional consultants—may be of considerable practical value to the local project. In this regard, the outsider is also a resource for the local project and must be able to deliver on these relationships effectively. These outside links also lend certain legitimacy to the views of the friendly outsider, however, and this legitimacy has to be managed carefully to enhance the possibilities for local change.

THE FRIENDLY OUTSIDER'S PROCESS SKILLS

The friendly outsider is a coach, not a director or a boss. The last thing most local groups who are stuck in difficult situations need is someone else telling them what to do. The coach counts on local people to be the talented players and helps them improve their skills and strategies. The boss takes over the direction, management, and control of subordinate local groups and acts for them, further disempowering them in most cases and usually guaranteeing that whatever changes are produced will not continue to produce locally initiated changes over the long run.

Self-Confidence and Integrity

The outsider must be self-confident in social situations and he or she must demonstrate integrity in action and reflection. The outsider can and may need to express doubts about what to do and how to do it, but the outsider should have a kind of basic optimism about herself or himself and about the collaborators. Not a form of arrogance, this confidence is expressed in open-mindedness, a lack of concern with maintaining rituals of status superiority over local people, a willingness to celebrate the capacities and actions of local people, and an active appreciation of the possibilities for change that exist locally. This also involves an ability to appreciate the skills of others to articulate this

appreciation tactfully. The outsider's interest in the success of a local project and community must be authentic. Local people are very good at sensing the sincerity of those who come to them from the outside.

The outside researcher does not wish to "go native." Building a cogenerative learning process does not imply that one should lose sight of professional and ethical values. Quite to the contrary, in a cogenerative learning process, it is important to be aware of the need for integrity, because that integrity will be the basis upon which real cooperation can be built. "Erasing" oneself is not a feasible strategy for cooperation that is built on diversity and the ability to cooperate to learn and act together. Integrity is, of course, as important for the local insiders as it is for the outsiders. Cogenerative learning can only take place when it is founded on the integrity of the participants and their joint processes.

Risk Taking

The outsider must also be a risk taker. Unless the outsider is willing and able to risk personal failure by supporting a local group that may or may not succeed, she or he will not provide the necessary moral support and confidence to people who are trying to persuade themselves to take risks as well. Most academics and bureaucrats are trained to avoid risks and to try to look good, no matter what happens. The friendly outsider must be willing to be implicated in the success or failure of local projects, as a professional and as a human being who is taking some responsibility for the lives of other human beings.

Irony

Finally, a kind of playfulness and irony¹ is an indispensable tool for the professional action researcher. Someone who is unremittingly serious and dour and carries the burdens of the world on his or her shoulders energizes no one. Humor and playfulness have an important role in social change processes. This is because AR projects attempt to suspend business as usual and try to produce unlikely but positive outcomes. In these contexts, the powers of irony, absurdity, and humor are considerable precisely because they cause ordinary thought to stop momentarily, creating juxtapositions that can provoke both amusement and openness to change.

Strictly speaking, the trope of irony centers on affirming in words facts or situations that are precisely the opposite of what the listener understands them to be. Irony is a kind of displacement, a viewing of the world in reverse that often provokes humor but also is capable of opening up patterns of thought to new possibilities.

Humor also evokes tacit knowledge; it provokes people to respond and to become active themselves. It can also equalize statuses by turning many

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participants into commentators on the local scene rather than reserving the right to definitive judgments to the professional outsider and powerful insiders.

There is a strong connection between irony, humor, and achieving a sense of Jacob's (1982) world of the possible versus the actual. Irony and humor look at the world from the vantage point of the possible, making the actual only one of the possible outcomes. The outsider's use of irony and other forms of displacing humor and commentary can induce local participants to do the same, opening up groups to brainstorming and the play of ideas that is a necessary part of prefiguring a possible new future.

Security

In addition to a willingness to face the complexities of learning a great variety of social research approaches, action researchers necessarily must have a certain mindset and personality, an ability to be themselves in the context of a group of local stakeholders. Action researchers must be personally secure enough to admit ignorance and uncertainty and yet be able to advocate their own understandings and hopes. This must be done sensitively and requires a capacity for empathy, integrity, and involvement.

Operating this way involves being open-minded, curious about and respectful of the experiences and knowledge of others, and a certain degree of playfulness that allows processes to develop in an unpressured way. It also requires an ability to be truly open to other people in a way that many academics find difficult.

Patience

Coping with uncertainty in a patient and secure way is one of the action researcher's most important traits. Complex projects with diverse stakeholders in highly charged situations do not yield to quick fixes or magic bullets. At many points in an AR project, it will not be clear where the project is going, if it is going anywhere, or if it is going to succeed in any way. The action researcher must not only be able to tolerate this uncertainty but be able to help the local stakeholders withstand this uncertainty and the sense of risk or demoralization that often accompanies it.

Thus the standards for action researchers are quite high. Action researchers must have very broad social research training, confidence, a commitment to democracy, a willingness to live with a degree of uncertainty, a clear sense of one's own professional limitations, and good personal reasons for being engaged with the local stakeholders in a particular project. Creating trustful relationships with people in the field can not be done unless the "real" person is present.

Becoming an Action Researcher

In Part 4 of this book, we take up the education of action researchers in detail. Here, we briefly rehearse some of our central contentions.

SOCIAL SKILLS

In conventional social science, there is relatively little attention paid to the social skills of the researcher. This is in accord with the dominant positivist notion that data are independent of the researcher. Much positivist research can take place without any social relationship between the performing researchers and the respondents to the survey. All that is demanded from the researcher is technical skill in being able to prepare an instrument, to distribute or administer it and collect the data, to use statistical or formal techniques to perform the necessary analysis, and be able to write a report.

Students can be trained in these skills independent of any relationship to the field. In fact, it is quite common for professors to let new students work on datasets that the professors have collected and to steer the students' activity in the direction of the professor's interests. This is both decontextualized research and decontextualized training.

In the realm of qualitative research, training students to handle interviews or engage in deeper ethnographic research requires some attention to relating to people in their life contexts. It is impossible to become a good qualitative interviewer without the skills of empathy, without the ability to listen and to engage the interviewee in a reflection process. In ethnographic work as in AR, the need for social skills to engage and live with local people is even higher.

PLANNING AND SPONTANEITY

In AR, the planning of the intervention is very important and should be as detailed as possible. This gives the researchers a chance to be prepared for the way the research process develops. There is no excuse for not really thinking through and planning for the process.

But, plans seldom match the actual process as it evolves. The projects always take off in unexpected directions and the researcher will have to adjust to this on the fly. If participants drop out of the project, if conflicts arise between participants or with the researchers, if funding changes, or if official regulations hamper development in desired directions, the process has to be recalibrated, sometimes a little, sometimes a great deal. The challenge for the researcher is to be able to read (make sense of) the actual situation in order to understand what is at stake and how to help the group move into taking adequate new actions.

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Many of these decisions will have to be made on the spot, and because these actions have to take place in real time, the sense making and the creation of good responses is mainly built out of tacit knowing and skillful improvisation. A thorough reflection can and must be made on the actions taken, but no full thinking through can be done on the spot. People who cannot by character or training tolerate this kind of situation definitely should not engage in AR.

Conclusions

While the standards for an action researcher are high and the multiplicity of forms of substantive knowledge and of skills needed is great, the same optimistic view of human capabilities makes it clear to us that people can be trained to become competent action researchers. They have to be trained holistically, however, and not given the compartmentalized, rote, banking-model kind of training that typifies so much conventional social science teaching. There is a great deal of substantive knowledge needed in AR and many different kinds of process skills. A combination of formal and apprenticeship training is required and we know that it works. In Part 4, we return to the education of action researchers in more detail.

Note

1. Irony is increasingly recognized as a key element in thoughtful action. See Rorty (1980) and Flood and Romm (1996).