

## Action research as a Mode of Relationship

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Retirement is an occasion to look back over one's life; and when I do so, and see what a large proportion of my time I have devoted to exploring 'action research', I confess that I sometimes feel surprised. For me it started in 1974, when, for reasons that I now can't fully recall, a colleague and I asked a group of teachers on an evening course to carry out a study of their own current professional work, using social science disciplines as a background resource rather than (as was then the custom) as the main topic. However, even though I can't recall the detailed thinking underlying this decision, it certainly involved some idea of 'relevance', of trying to get 'knowledge' to have an impact on practical life (rather than remaining separate, apart, 'academic'), to make 'inquiry' into a process that enriches what we do rather than simply what we 'know about'.

That was 1974. And I remember clearly being amazed at the level of enthusiasm the course generated, compared with other courses I was teaching at the time. Of course, there could have been reasons for this enthusiasm quite unconnected with the practical focus of the inquiry task (some student groups do seem to generate a culture of enthusiasm and commitment, while others – apparently similar – don't). But in spite of this obvious gap in my reasoning, I persisted in attributing the success of the course to its mode of inquiry. And when I retired, thirty years or so later, I was still wrestling with the mode of inquiry that developed from this early experiment (what I came to think of as 'action research') – still uncertain as to how it worked, still doubtful as to how it could fit with current professional contexts and still puzzling over the nature of its principles and methods.

My question is: what kept me so interested for so long? Because, in many ways, action research turned out to be more difficult than I originally expected (both for me and for my students), to encounter more opposition than I expected (from students, from academics and from organizational managers) and to transform the world much *less* than I expected. Indeed, we currently seem to live in a world dominated overwhelmingly by quantitative targets and codified practices, imposed from above and tending, therefore, to undermine the freedom of workers to explore and develop their practice in the autonomous way that action research proposes. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of all this, I feel that action research was and is a genuinely 'noble cause' to which it has been worth devoting most of my working life. In the following argument I'll be trying to indicate the nature of this 'nobility' in a series of steps. The first deals with the relationship between knowledge and work, the second with the nature of organizations, and the final step focuses on the nature of social relationships generally.

### *Action Research, Knowledge and Work*

'Work' places us in a relationship with the materials and forces of nature and with the apparent separateness of other people. It is always a potential confrontation:

carpenters face pieces of wood that are not yet of the required length; pianists face complex cross rhythms on the page that their fingers must bring into harmonious expression; teachers face as-yet uninterested students; managers face customers and staff with differing interests and motives. And, since I am not just talking about paid employment here, carers face the pain and neediness of the ill and the vulnerable and tasks such as cleaning and cooking. Work, then, produces harmony and value.

To engage in 'production' is to create a positive role for ourselves in the natural and social world. And in producing value for the world, we at the same time produce our own selves as valuable beings. There is thus a sort of dialectic operating. My work generates value and harmony out there in the world, and at the same time my involvement with external materials and with other people transforms my own being, creating the experiences that incrementally build up my knowledge of materials, objects, people and my own capacities in different situations. (Hence the potential psychological trauma of unemployment and, indeed, of retirement!)

But this sense of producing social value through our work can be undermined. It is undermined if we feel that we have no scope for shaping our actions, if we work, as it were, under a sense of powerlessness. Because without this sense of autonomy, if we feel that we are merely obedient agents and that all the decisions concerning our work are taken 'elsewhere', then we lose that dialectic between the value that our actions create for others and the value that contributing to others' welfare creates in our own being. 'Work' in the sense of producing value is thereby reduced to 'doing a job' and the money we may earn is no remedy: we decline from being producers to being consumers.

So, my argument here is that 'work' must have the form whereby engaging in it generates a general sense of being 'enhanced' by it and, in particular, a sense of accumulating expertise. At first this happens, as it were, 'naturally'. On the first few occasions, the decisions required by a given type of work are new and even unexpected, and will thus create some form of learning irrespective of whether or not our decisions are successful. However, in spite of the inherent complexity and potential for development implicit in professional decisions, it is possible (though regrettable) that frequent repetition may lead to a sense of their familiarity, and that what had at first been difficult reflections on what to do are gradually smoothed out into comfortable routines. (At one level, of course, however regrettable, this does lead to increased 'efficiency', and employers and managers have an interest in taking advantage of workers' ability to convert their expertise into routines by increasing the work required in a given time so as to reduce costs. But this is to buy efficiency at the cost of workers' sense that their work is a source of development.)

However, when work expertise reaches a certain minimum point, engaging in action research becomes, potentially, an inherent component of one's activity, whereby the understandings on which the work depends are made explicit so that they can be shared, questioned and, in the light of differing possibilities, experimentally modified. Action-research, then, adds to 'work-as-production' a dimension of cyclical self-monitoring, by groups of workers and other parties to the task, to ensure that work remains an opportunity for growth – growth in understanding of ourselves, of the task, and of the other people involved in it; and growth in awareness of relevant bodies of knowledge. These bodies of knowledge, therefore, acquire significance not (merely)

for their own sake but for the sake of the values entailed in the work, and these values – I have suggested – necessarily involve the emotional and spiritual growth of those engaged in it. ‘Research’ (meaning, shall we say, ‘the development of new knowledge’) is *required* by ‘work’, as long as work has a form that includes its inherent potential for creativity. And ‘action research’ is the quintessential form of research that is directly focused in this way. (In other words, I am not denying the value of other forms of research where the focus and purpose is different, i.e. where it has an *indirect* relationship with working practices.)

### *Action Research and Organizational Relationships*

So far, so good. But we all know very well that most people’s experience of work is *not* of creative opportunities for growth. On the contrary, it tends to be an experience of constraint and pressure, of demands and controls from above and schedules that leave no time for reflective analysis and innovation. So the noble cause of action research entails not just a critique of the nature of knowledge but a critique of the organizations in which our knowledge is applied.

The ideal of organizations, as presented by Max Weber, is of a system whereby policy intended for the general welfare is handed down, step by step through a bureaucratic hierarchy, staff at each level deciding only on the *means* for implementing the *aims* presented to them from the level above. The key values of such organizations are impartiality and efficiency in the application of policy, while the hierarchical structure means that responsibility for the overall task of the organization is located at the top, i.e. ‘senior management’.

Now, if this task is simply the manufacture of a physical product, bureaucratic organizational structure would not necessarily be a problem. Since each step of the process would be concerned with objects, the sequence of decisions could reasonably be seen as technical rather than ethical – which is one of the reasons why manufacture can in principle be robotized. But Weber’s model of bureaucracy was supposed to be, above all, a description of organizations concerned with providing services for people, and here the task of the organization necessarily entails ethical considerations for staff at *all* levels, as in organizations set up for the enactment of justice, education, care of the elderly, government (and even buying and selling).

For such organizations the removal of ethical responsibility to the level of higher management is potentially disastrous. Because the form of the hierarchical bureaucracy tends to substitute managerial efficiency (in the transmission of policy ‘down the line’) for the array of what Aristotle would have called the ‘virtues’ inherent in the task that the organization supposedly pursues. Thus, instead of the virtues required of responsible citizens (my list would include, patience, sensitivity, honesty, diligence, courage, compassion, awareness), some of which are embodied in the codes of practice for ‘professions’, the hierarchical organization requires from its staff, above all, obedience.

The problems here are as follows. Firstly, the hierarchical structure creates the widespread phenomena of work-place bullying, overwork, and the continuous attempt to reduce costs at the expense of quality – the result of managers pursuing ‘efficiency’ as the one value they are clearly, as it were, permitted. And, secondly, the

moral vacuum thus created leads to cynicism or despair on the part of staff who feel that organizational priorities prevent them from realizing their values in their work. In this way, the hierarchical organization empties work of its virtues and exemplifies what Marx calls 'alienated labour': work becomes an imposed activity whose purposes and outcomes 'belong to' others, rather than being an activity that expresses the worker's own, creative sense of responsibility towards others and her / himself.

This state of affairs, what one might call 'the moral plight of organizational work', is paradoxical in the following sense. On the one hand it is felt to be the inevitable outcome of inescapably powerful societal forces, requiring all organizations to accept, in their allocation of resources and effort, the imperatives of competitive profitability – cutting 'costs', reducing 'waste', and meeting budgetary 'targets' set on high. On the other hand, these imperatives are, on the whole, seen as regrettable by all concerned, who would prefer, if possible, that the work of the organization should indeed embody the very social virtues it systematically ignores. The paradox itself expresses the 'alienation' previously referred to: staff (from the chief executive down to those working directly with clients) feel unable to enact the virtues they nevertheless espouse.

At one level the paradox is experienced as a conflict within the organization, between those who, seeing themselves as 'pragmatists', say that ethical ideals are 'all very well' *BUT* 'in the real world' the 'bottom line' of budgetary control by external sources of power must determine events, and others who see themselves as 'idealistically' struggling for the values they see as under threat. At another level the paradox is experienced as a dilemma for individuals torn between the plausibility, indeed the necessity, of both positions. Since paradoxes and dilemmas are, so to speak 'unstable phenomena', we also find, typically: 1) hypocrisy or 2) self-delusion, both producing 3) ideological 'spin', whereby it is claimed that the organizational values are actually being realized, whereas it is clear to others that this is not the case.

Here then is the second point at which action research is relevant as a 'noble cause'. The conflicts, dilemmas and paradoxes indicated above create an emotional, intellectual and political 'space' for a process of inquiry into organizational work, an inquiry that addresses the perennial discrepancy between the 'values' of the work (see the list of citizens' virtues listed on the previous page) and actual organizational activities. This inquiry process needs to follow action research principles for the following reasons. It must be a search for new possibilities because dissatisfaction with the contradictions of the status quo is endemic. In other words, it must be 'research' rather than merely 'monitoring' or 'auditing'. It must be carried out by those within the situation rather than by outsiders, because the process will be inevitably controversial, given the conflicting perceptions of organizational reality already mentioned. Hence, any outsider-led investigation is destined to generate, from some organizational staff at least, defensive rejection: 'This is all very well, but what *they* don't understand is...' And it must be concerned not merely with 'explanation' but with 'what is to be done', since it is at the level of action ('the work') that pains and dilemmas are experienced by those involved.

*Action Research as a General Mode of Social Relationship*

But if the sense of powerlessness in one's work role (and, consequently, the inhibition of workers' innovatory imagination) is determined by massive societal forces, as argued above, is it not (at best) Quixotic to propose that small groups of staff engaging in action research might make any substantial impact on the problem? Surely, this sounds less like a noble cause than a forlorn hope! What can action research in itself 'achieve'? In one sense the issue is how to bring about radical change. For example, if you wanted to transform a social services department so that it became *genuinely* effective in supporting and sustaining vulnerable members of the community, you might think that what is needed is the appointment of a new, more progressively committed senior management team, i.e. the take-over of the levers of power by people with deep insight and expertise, the equivalent of Lenin's 'Vanguard Party' or Plato's 'Guardians'. Or you might think you could make a radical difference by devising a system of Information Technology that would 'empower' staff and clients by linking them directly with relevant data and resources. In both cases, I think, the prognosis would not be encouraging. Because in neither case does the proposed solution address the deep causes of the problems I have outlined, i.e. hierarchical organizational structures with a means / ends rationality, depriving citizens of autonomy. Consequently, the chances are that as the new initiatives (managerial or technological) were implemented they would be forced, sooner or later, to accommodate to the patterns of behaviour (motives, priorities, ideologies, attitudes) of the system they were designed to transform.

The key idea here, then, is that radical change cannot just be 'implemented' according to a means / ends rationality, because the values embodied in the 'ends' are likely to be subverted, en route, by the absence of those values in the 'means'. Instead, I suggest, a radically changed state of affairs can only be achieved by being 'modelled' (i.e. enacted) in the process of trying to bring it about. (By 'radical', I mean a change that envisages and requires a change in values, conceptions and attitudes, as opposed to simply a change in technique, and this is surely the case if we are considering how to change organizations that foster alienated work practices.) In this way (setting up a process that *enacts* the desired outcome) one addresses the long-standing problem of 'utopian' thinking, which merely details a vision of the future without considering how one might progress towards it. And this is where, I think, action research principles and procedures can make their most vital and deepest contribution.

In other words, the *methods* for action research can be helpfully re-framed in terms of the '*relationship ideals*' for work and for social life generally. The reason why action research is an appropriate starting point for more general change may be summed up in two simple points. 1) A research project is specifically 'set up' for a specific purpose with a limited time-frame and scope – as opposed to organizational life in general, which is, as it were 'already on-going'. 2) A research project is by definition a search for innovation at some level – usually of course merely in terms of new concepts, or new statistical relations between phenomena deemed to be of importance. But in the case of action research the specific purpose of the project is, precisely, to improve the work practices of staff in the organization, for the benefit of themselves and their clients.

As I argued earlier, work is, ideally, a transformative relationship with the physical world and with other people, which cumulatively creates and re-creates the self; and organizations are, ideally, sites for the practice of the civic virtues (sensitivity,

compassion, patience, courage, honesty, diligence, etc.). So action research, as a mode of inquiry intimately linked with (indeed arising from) the experience of work in organizations, can be, as it were, a 'microcosm', where these values can be rehearsed on a small scale. The necessary relationships between those engaging in action research can be specified so that they pre-figure the ideals that, elsewhere, may be absent, and this gives us a basis for re-presenting action research 'methods'. Thus, for example, in action research the shared formulation of a research goal requires above all honesty in sharing experiences; the purpose of data collecting is to learn from others' wisdom; the analysis of data is a shared process where the purpose is to learn from others' different perspectives; and the framing of results is tentative and sensitively negotiated, concerned with what new possibilities we might agree as being worth, at this stage, exploring.

I have mentioned 'honesty', 'learning from others', 'accepting others' different-ness', 'tentativeness' and 'sensitivity': are such 'virtues' arbitrary, plucked perhaps from an idiosyncratically concocted personal ideology? If so, is it necessary (or possible) to look for a set of relationship ideals that have some objectivity or general theoretical grounding?

For my part I find guidance in the relationship ideals implicit in two traditions: Marxism and Buddhism. For Marx, the ideal for human relationship is derived from the mutuality of social being, from the creative autonomy and freedom from destructive competition and external appropriation, which obtains when people meet together in the social production of that which is of value to all. I think some helpful procedural principles for the conduct of relationships among research participants could be derived from that! However, Marx's main concern is, of course, the societal rather than the interpersonal, and so I find rather more guidance for this stage of my argument in Buddhism, where, indeed, the central focus is on awareness, of the self, of other people, and of the relationship taking place at a given moment. The 'sangha' (the value-based community specifically concerned to foster the growth of its members towards insight into the nature of reality) can only be effective if its members continuously strive to embody in each present moment its ultimate principle – awareness of the self as impermanent, as continuously being transformed by its inseparability from others. It is from this underlying insight that Buddhist relationship ideals are derived: generosity, non-judgmental acceptance, care for others' well-being, responsibility for the ethical quality of one's responses, avoidance of egotism (desire for dominance or approval), etc. Again, it would not take much thought to see how such precepts could helpfully inform the processes of action research: respect for the ideas of all participants, willingness to learn from unexpected perspectives, collective production of results and documentation. And of course, it is easy to see how such principles are applicable not only to the conduct of inquiry but (ultimately, who knows when!) to the working relationships of organizational life in general.

However, I don't wish to be thought of as suggesting that all action researchers need or ought to be crypto-Marxists or crypto-Buddhists! I only mention these perspectives to indicate how I now, in retrospect, see why action research has been so important for me for such a long time: action research, I have come to understand, is not simply a strategy for the conduct of social research but at the same time a way of engaging with a vision of how the world might be transformed. Marxism and Buddhism, then, are suggested as illustrative examples. Of course, others will have their own cultural

resources for their deepest sense of how the world ‘could be’, and it is important that one responds ‘ecumenically’ to the variety of these traditions: humanist, psychotherapeutic, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, Baha’i, etc. However, some interpretations of these resources could be, I think, misleading insofar as they may rest on a desire to transform the world by excluding others or coercing them into a specific set of beliefs. Here again, I think that the idea of action research can operate helpfully as a set of criteria: for *inquiry* to be effective in achieving change in *practice* it must foster generosity and respect towards those whose current understandings are different from our own. And without this, we will not *learn*; we will not only experience the failure of inquiry processes but the continuation in the world at large of oppressive and potentially violent relationships.

So, in conclusion, I see action research not only as potentially valuable in addressing particular, local issues for a specific group of workers but, insofar as it successfully enacts a certain iconic set of relationships, as one of the single steps that might initiate the thousand mile journey that confronts humanity in general, if we are, in the long term, to survive...

Background Reading:

Alasdair MacIntyre: *After Virtue*, Duckworth, 1985

Sangharakshita: *What is The Sangha?*, Windhorse, 2000