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Shankar Sankaran

Action Research 2005; 3; 341

DOI: 10.1177/1476750305058486

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ARTICLE

Notes from the field

Action research conversations

Shankar Sankaran
Southern Cross University, Australia

ABSTRACT

I had the pleasure of meeting several action researchers across the USA during my sabbatical late last year. The multiple purposes for my visit to the USA were to meet doctoral students doing their research in organizational change and development in Hawaii; interview prominent action researchers in the US about examining action research dissertations; and to have discussions with action researchers on ways to increase conversations among action researchers around the world. I thought it would be good to share some insights from my visit with fellow action researchers as a letter to *Action Research*.

KEY WORDS

- action research
- communities of practice
- journal review
- networking
- online communities
- research community
- thesis examination

Some lasting impressions . . .

While I had spent some time in the US before, when I was working in industry, this was my first time there as an academic and an action researcher. This was also the first time I was visiting the mid-west and the eastern states.

What struck me most about my visit was the enthusiasm with which action researchers were willing to meet me and take extra efforts to make my stay comfortable. Davydd Greenwood at Cornell University arranged for me to give a talk to participatory action researchers and also put me up. He was kind enough to meet my wife and me at the airport and take us to dinner with his wife Pilar. Moreover, one of Davydd's former students, Akihiro Ogawa, who had read about my conducting action research in a Japanese organization, was eager to meet me. He and his wife drove all the way from Boston with their new-born baby to listen to my talk and returned the same night. They drove through the night so as not to upset the baby. I was very touched. During my lecture at Cornell I described the arduous journey that I took to become an action researcher in academia from a senior manager in industry. Participants commented that it was good to demonstrate that the path to becoming an action researcher is a rocky one.

Elizabeth Kasl at California Institute of Integral Studies had been very ill just before we landed in San Francisco but despite being weak and recovering from her illness made an effort to meet us at the Institute. Elizabeth had been initially concerned that coming from a business school my interest might have a solely commercial angle. She was surprised to find that this was not so and that I was really interested in the idea of contributing to action research. A similar doubt had been expressed by participatory action researchers at Cornell, who felt that PAR was about helping the disadvantaged and empowering them and wondered why business people were interested in action research. When I pointed out that many people who work in organizations are also sometimes disempowered and action research could empower them, they seemed to be more comfortable. Davydd felt that my talking about action research in organizations could also help legitimate the use of action research in the business school at Cornell.

Mary Brydon-Miller at the University of Cincinnati arranged for two of her former students, Dr Steve Kroeger and Dr Tammy Schwartz, to come out on a Sunday during the Thanksgiving holidays and take us out for breakfast on the day we arrived in Cincinnati. We had a great time with them and Tammy showed us some of the sights of Cincinnati. Carla Shafer at Cornell also took us to visit a famous gorge in Ithaca when we visited Cornell.

Both Susan Noffke at the University of Illinois and Randy Stoecker at the University of Toledo were surprised that we took the trouble to make a day trip by bus all the way to their universities to meet them. The bus journeys were of a much longer duration than the meeting we had with them. In fact while I was

visiting Susan she had an emergency to attend to but she made sure that while she was away I could spend my time usefully talking to another action researcher, Peter Kuchinke, who was interested in action research in business. Peter also knew Professor Mike Marquardt of George Washington University whom I knew previously and could not meet during my visit as Mike had to go away to Hong Kong. I was disappointed that I had missed Mike but meeting Peter made me feel better.

We were also honoured to be invited to action researchers' homes – Bill Torbert in Boston, Jay Rothman in Yellow Springs, Ohio and Hilary Bradbury in Los Angeles.

We also learnt that Jay taught at Antioch College where annual lectures were held in honour of John Dewey. While I was at Jay's place he described the work he had done for resolving conflicts between the police and the African-American community in Cincinnati called the Cincinnati Collaborative Process. This was interesting because Sydney had had a similar conflict between the police and the indigenous community recently. He also gave me a compact disc explaining the process he used that I could offer to interested parties in Australia.

The US action research community

One of the differences I noticed between the action research community in Australia and the US was that they did not meet each other as often as we do in Australia. In fact Jay Rothman jokingly suggested that I should write a note about why the action researchers in the mid-west of the US should try and meet each other. I suggested to Davydd Greenwood that a World Congress in the US might be one way to get them together but he felt that although Cornell could host such an event, Ithaca may not be a convenient location for most people, especially due to the cost of flights to Ithaca.

I also found that many US action researchers tend to use the term 'Participatory Action Research' (or PAR) rather than 'action research' to cover all types of action research approaches. This may be because the term PAR was adopted by Bill Whyte (1991) for the title of his book which renewed interest in action research in the US. The book written by Herr and Anderson (2005) helps to address some of these issues. In fact, some of the action researchers I met were inspired by the fact that Southern Cross University in Australia had accepted the idea of setting up the College of Action Research as a designated area of research strength and that we were engaging several schools in the university in conducting multidisciplinary action research.

Action research conversations

My question about how to get action researchers to have more conversations was prompted by a remark made by Peter Reason in September 2002 when he reviewed (Reason, 2002, pp. 225–229) a book on action research edited by a group from Southern Cross University (Sankaran, Dick, Passfield, & Swepson, 2001) and remarked that if he had sat down with the authors of the book to have a conversation he might have understood their purpose in writing the book better. During my trip I was reminded of Peter's remark.

I ended up meeting 25 action researchers from outside Australia in 2004 and had many more conversations than I had planned. The concept of 'small worlds' (Watts, 2004) seems to work very well in action research circles. I have included a list of the people I met, with information about them available from their websites (see Appendix 1). The bibliography also includes some publications by the people I met at the end of this article.

By sharing my findings on increasing conversations about action research with fellow editorial and advisory board members of *Action Research*, as well as its readers, I hope to engage in a conversation about how to progress with this idea further.

The following are some themes that came out of my conversations with action researchers in 2004.

Ambassadors of action research

My meetings with action researchers started long before I left Australia on this trip. It started with an email from Tricia Vilkinas of the University of South Australia in May 2004 asking us whether we would invite Dr Victor Friedman from Israel to come to our university when he visited them to supervise a student using action science. Victor and I had met virtually 10 years ago for a similar purpose when he advised me via emails on how to use action science when I was doing my PhD. I had not met him face-to-face until this invitation arrived. So I jumped at this opportunity to meet one of my *senseis* (gurus) face-to-face.

We had long and wonderful conversations with Victor in Tweed Heads as a guest of the Southern Cross Institute of Action Research (SCIAR) in July 2004 along with our staff and students. In fact he became our guest speaker at our first doctoral symposium for Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) students. Victor stole the show with a story about a school reform project in Israel that resonated with the audience. This was based on a research that was conducted among 'problem' school children but it became apparent that the problem also was caused by the teachers who acted differently with these children due to their 'stereotyping' these students. Later Victor met a group of dedicated action

researchers from Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) Association in Brisbane. Victor even agreed to attend the ALARPM National Conference held at Darwin (up north) as a keynote speaker. The Brisbane group of ALARPM continued to meet to practice action science based on Victor's workshop even after his departure.

In August 2004 my paper was accepted for a Knowledge Management Conference held at Greenwich, UK, and I decided to use this opportunity to look up Peter Reason and Judi Marshall at the University of Bath. When I spoke about my proposed trip to the US Peter recommended that I meet Elizabeth Kasl, Jim Ludema and Sonia Ospina who were doing action research projects that would be of interest me.

One commonality among the people I met was their connections with the Sage *Action Research* Journal. So I thought that perhaps journals like *Action Research* do act as a link between action researchers. In fact I had also come to know many people whom I met before and during my visit through my connection with *Action Research*. So I decided I would explore this linkage through my discussions. There were differing views on this.

Do journals or books help in increasing conversations?

Davydd Greenwood felt that even though the *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and journals such as *Action Research* and *Concepts and Transformations* have promoted increased awareness of action research they do not serve the purpose of increasing conversations as there is a 'dead space' between the authors and reviewers. The traditional blind review process does not allow for conversations between the reviewers and the action researchers who contribute articles, unlike the online journal *Action Research International* (see <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/ari/arihomet.html>). Discussion lists such as 'arlist' maintained by Bob Dick and the global dialogue initiated by John Gaventa through the Institute of Development Studies (see <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html>) on Learning and Teaching Practices in Higher Education (<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/networks/learnparticip/>) do result in better conversations, but the conversations on these forums die off after some time.

When I met Hilary Bradbury she said that she had recently started the practice of sharing reviewers' comments for *Action Research* once the review was complete. And more recently we've seen reviewers' comments flowering into a separate article, as for instance with Elizabeth Kasl et al.'s 'Reflections on Erica Foldy's first-person inquiry' (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005). Another angle for increasing participation with the journal began with discussions with Peter Reason and Judi Marshall at Bath. We explored how *Action Research* could help researchers who normally did not write

for academic journals to publish their research. One idea that arose was that an experienced action researcher (perhaps a member of the advisory board on *Action Research*) would co-author articles with junior researchers who had not published and include their own critical account of the research. A group of academics from Southern Cross University are now putting together such an article based on a PhD programme, with five managers conducting action research to solve problems at their workplace. These managers normally would not write for academic journals.

A continuing question remains about – *how the action research community* might achieve more transparency in the review process of, say, *Action Research*. We recently worked with the refereed journal *Qualitative Report* that has a more open review process. Although the reviewers initially review the article ‘blindly’ to check whether it is appropriate for the journal and can be improved to be published in the journal, the review then becomes more transparent and takes on a conversational mode between the reviewers and the authors and they work together to get the article ready for publication. By this method both the authors and the reviewers are satisfied with the final article. Perhaps by modifying the current review process of *Action Research* we could make it possible for authors and reviewers to communicate with each other more freely, possibly using a website that simultaneously preserves confidentiality and commitment to rigorous standards.

Can websites be used to increase conversations?

From the conversations I had about the role of journals in increasing conversations it became apparent that electronic media such as discussion lists and websites could increase the conversations between action researchers more rapidly than the print media. We do have a website offering action research resources at Southern Cross University, and the University of Bath has a website that is frequented by action researchers. Is there nonetheless need to create one common connection point for all action researchers?

I discussed the possibility of having a common website for action researchers to increase their conversations. Both Davydd Greenwood and Mary Brydon-Miller felt that web pages could help in increasing conversations but they take a lot of time and energy to maintain and could burn out the people who looked after them.

I met with a group of people including Nimat Barazangi and Carla Shafer at Cornell who are involved with the Participatory Action Research Network (PARN). They discussed how they could contribute to conversations between action researchers through their website. I suggested that since the action research websites at the University of Bath and Southern Cross University are providing

certain services for action researchers, PARN could think of looking at other services that could be useful, such as setting up of an international database of action researchers on the PARN site with links to the websites of these researchers to serve as a kind of a 'knowledge map' for action researchers. PARN is planning to organize a search conference in 2005 to discuss its future and explore this proposal.

Randy Stoecker, whom I met at the University of Toledo, felt that interactive web software may provide a better way of having conversations around the world than just a website where people looked for resources. Randy facilitates the online conference on community, organizing and development at the University of Toledo (<http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/>).

In Australia, ALARPM serves as a networking organization for Australian action researchers. ALARPM has been involved in holding several World Congresses of Action Research along with the Participatory Action Research Society. So my next question was how far professional organizations like ALARPM contribute to increased conversations among action researchers?

Do professional organizations provide networking opportunities for action researchers?

Davydd felt that the World Congress organized by ALARPM (www.alarpm.org.au) and the Participatory Action Research (PAR) Society serve as effective platforms for communication for action researchers around the world. ALARPM also serves as a focus for Australian action researchers to meet occasionally, and because of this a close community has been built up there. However, there is no such single body in the US to enable action researchers to get together. A similar sentiment was echoed by Mary.

But it became apparent that action researchers do get together in other ways in the US. Lyle Yorks from Teacher's College in Columbia University observed that since action research is not mainstream research in many universities in the US, the action researchers tended to meet around their content disciplines. For example, at the Academy of Management (AoM) conference the Learning and Education people who are interested in action research get together before the conference. Bridget O'Connor at New York University (NYU) mentioned that the American Educational Research Association (AERA) has a special interest group in action research (<http://coe.westga.edu/arsig/>).

It seems to me that action researchers could make an effort to get together in meetings associated with events not specifically organized for action research but related to it in some way. For example, Mary Brydon-Miller and Susan Noffke from the University of Illinois are planning to organize a Town Hall meeting of action researchers at the Qualitative Research Conference being held in

Illinois in 2005. However, there should be a way to communicate key points discussed at these meetings to other action researchers. Posting a note on an action research website or publishing a field note like this in *Action Research* could be one way to do this.

Six degrees of separation

Meeting with several action researchers during this trip was made possible only by contacts provided by other action researchers before or during my trip. Peter brought me together with Elizabeth Kasl at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco and Sonia Ospina at New York University. Sonia suggested that I meet Lyle Yorks at the Teacher's College at Columbia University. Mary put me in touch with Susan Noffke at the University of Illinois and Randy Stoecker at the University of Toledo. Victor suggested that I meet Jay Rothman at Yellow Springs. Mary also asked Steve Kroeger and Tammy Schwartz to meet me in Cincinnati. And because Victor used the term 'action inquiry' at his workshop I contacted Bill Torbert at Boston College who had recently published a book on action inquiry. Both Davydd and Mary suggested that I meet Gary Anderson at NYU, who invited Michael Bronner and Bridget O'Connor, also at NYU, to the meeting. While visiting Susan I was introduced to Peter Kuchinke at the University of Illinois. Elizabeth introduced me to Dean Elias whom I could not meet but was able to talk to over the phone.

Not only did I make new friends in the US but I also came back with a list of action researchers I have not met in Australia such as Tom Denison at Monash University and Lyn Simpson at Queensland University of Technology, who were part of Randy's Community Informatics Network.

Examining action research theses

Before I went on my sabbatical I had started working on publishing an article about issues related to the examination of postgraduate research theses (dissertations) at Australian universities. In fact the work on this article started off due to our concerns about examining action research theses. As we started discussing action research theses we found that, in our own experience as researchers, supervisors and examiners, we faced a multitude of problems with the examination of any thesis. So we started discussing examining all theses and decided to follow it up by writing a second article devoted to issues with action research theses. Hence I decided to talk about issues concerning the examination of action research theses with some of the academics I would meet during my travels.

I interviewed four action researchers about issues that arose out of examin-

ing action research theses and talked briefly with others I met as part of our data collection for the article. The data that we collected is being analysed now with a view to present a paper at the next World Congress of Action Research in 2006. But I will briefly mention some of the interesting points I discovered.

I found that although the Australian and US doctoral research systems were different, many of the issues regarding action research theses were the same, such as: securing ethics approval; how to write an action research thesis; what criteria are used to examine a doctoral thesis; and how you can train or mentor examiners to examine a doctoral thesis. But I came back with the feeling that the developmental approach used by US universities through setting up an examination committee that allows for intermediate communication between the students, supervisor (advisor) and examination committee could be a better approach for an evolving methodology like action research compared to the Australian system where the (external) examiners have no contact with students.

Summary

My visit to the US has resulted in some very interesting conversations with fellow action researchers that have opened my eyes to new ways of collaborating with action researchers globally. I have made many new friendships that will grow with time.

As people interested in promoting action research we should find better ways to help increase contact between action researchers, whatever school of action research or discipline we may belong to. Bill Torbert has predicted that in 10 to 15 years action research will become a predominant way of doing useful research. There is evidence that the medical community in particular is turning to participative methodologies and calling explicitly for PAR approaches in government-funded research. Perhaps increasing our conversations and contacts can support the growing espoused interest with authentic practice. I invite feedback from other editorial and advisory members of *Action Research* about some of the ideas proposed in this field note. I plan to organize an open discussion on the topic of 'action research conversations' at the next World Action Research Congress to be held in Holland in 2006.

You can help me prepare for this in three ways:

- 1 Write a letter to the editors of *Action Research* on what you felt about the various ideas discussed in this field note, especially about ways to bring the action research communities closer together.
- 2 Initiate a conversation about some of these topics in *arlist*.
- 3 Send me an email at ssankara@scu.edu.au for me to compile your views and summarize them in *Action Research* before we connect again at the World Congress.

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Appendix 1

<i>Action researcher</i>	<i>Webpage</i>
Anderson, Gary	http://education.nyu.edu/education/steinhardt/db/faculty/1405/Dept_design/0
Barazangi, Nimat	http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/parfem/bios/barazangi.htm
Bradbury, Hilary	http://wsomfaculty.cwru.edu/bradbury/
Bronner, Michael	http://education.nyu.edu/education/steinhardt/db/faculty/1001/Dept_design/0
Brydon-Miller, Mary	http://www.uc.edu/ucl/faculty.htm
Driskell, David	http://www.dcrp.cornell.edu/people/profile.mgi?fm=Driskell
Gozawa, Joanne	http://www.ciis.edu/faculty/gozawa.html
Greenwood, Davydd	http://falcon.arts.cornell.edu/Anthro/faculty/faculty_DGreenwood.php
Kasl, Elizabeth	http://www.ciis.edu/faculty/kasl.html
Kroeger, Steve	http://www.uc.edu/profiles/profile.asp?id=1735
Kuchinke, Peter	http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/hre/Faculty/kuchinke/kuchinke.htm
Marshall, Judi	http://www.bath.ac.uk/management/about/people/Judi%20Marshall/
Marsick, Victoria	http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/?facid=vjm5
Noffke, Susan	http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/frp/n/s-noffke
O'Connor, Bridget	http://education.nyu.edu/education/steinhardt/db/faculty/1002/Dept_design/0
Ospina, Sonia	http://www.nyu.edu/wagner/faculty/facultyDetail.php?whereField=facultyID&whereValue=29
Reason, Peter	http://www.bath.ac.uk/~mnsppwr/
Rothman, Jay	http://www.ariagroup.com/
Schwartz, Tammy	http://www.units.muohio.edu/eap/departments/ted/Schwartz.1.htm
Shafer, Carla	http://cu-ed100.com/cshafer/
Stoecker, Randy	http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/stoeckerfolio/stoekerefolio.htm
Torbert, Bill	http://www2.bc.edu/~torbert/
Vargas- Mendez, Leonardo	http://www.psc.cornell.edu/faculty.htm
Yorks, Lyle	http://www.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/?facid=ly84

Shankar Sankaran is an Associate Professor at the Graduate College of Management at Southern Cross University in Australia and also the Director of the College of Action Research. He supervises doctoral students using action research in business from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, India, UK and USA. Shankar is an engineer

by background and used action research for his PhD, studying how engineering managers learn from solving real problems at the workplace at a Japanese multinational in Singapore. He is actively involved in the activities of the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association (ALARPM) of Australia promoting action learning and research in Australia. Shankar has presented and published refereed papers and edited a book on the practical application of action learning and action research in organizations. Shankar also acts as a facilitator for action learning based leadership development programs in private sector and community care organizations. *Address:* Graduate College of Management, Southern Cross University, Brett Street, PO Box 42, Tweed Heads, NSW 2485, Australia. [*Email:* ssankara@scu.edu.au]