

November 2007

RECONNECT PROGRAM
2005/2006 ACTION RESEARCH REPORTS
SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

Report One: Process Report

PORTER ORCHARD & ASSOCIATES

Contents

<u>1. INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>2. SERVICES PERCEPTION OF AR</u>	<u>3</u>
2.1 VALUE OF AR	3
2.2 CHALLENGES TO AR	4
<u>3. MANAGING AR</u>	<u>4</u>
<u>4. IMPACT ON SERVICE MODELS</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>5. AR CYCLE</u>	<u>7</u>
5.1 AR QUESTIONS	7
5.2 COMMENCEMENT PHASE FOR AR	7
5.3 CLARITY OF AR PHASES	8
5.4 CONTINUITY OF LOGIC	8
5.5 ENDING A CYCLE	8
<u>6. WORKING WITH STAKEHOLDERS</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>7. OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>8. DOCUMENTATION</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>9. SUSTAINABILITY</u>	<u>10</u>
<u>10. RECOMMENDATIONS</u>	<u>11</u>

1. Introduction

The focus of this report as in previous years is to provide the Reconnect Programs, the administrators at FaCSIA and the members of the Action Research Committee (ARC) with some analysis of the implementation of Action Research (AR) across the 94 Reconnect services that submitted AR sections in their Self Evaluation Reports (SER).

Sections 2, to 4, 8 and 9 generally use the services' reflections on implementing AR whilst sections 5 to 7 draw on the 164 AR examples that were provided by each service in order to understand the application of AR. This report focuses not on the issues under investigation in services AR explorations, but on how the process of AR has shaped a service's thinking and action in response to the identified issues and their reflections on the effectiveness of their response. Unfortunately 25% of services did not reflect on their processes of AR or provided very little detail.

The AR contributions were read for this report to ascertain if the different aspects of the AR cycle were apparent. That is the primary interest was in whether or not an example was indicative of an effective AR process regardless of whether the format for reporting was a narrative with photos without the mention of any AR terms or a structured template that broke down the AR cycle into separate phases.

It is noteworthy that about 70% of services this year have commenced their AR explorations with observation, and offered a rationale for their exploration, which has then allowed the movement through the AR cycle to progress more fluidly. The other area of improvement in the AR this year has been the clarity in the individual phases of the AR, allowing services and the reader to understand more easily the momentum of the work being done in both the planning and action phases.

Ending a cycle of AR still seems to be an area requiring some improvement. Almost 50% of services could really improve on their accounts provided at the end of a cycle by including summaries of stakeholder observations as well as their reflections on these observations. The end of the AR cycle and its outcomes for young people and families needs to be tied back to the initial issue or concern being explored. That is what effect did the AR have on the young persons connection to their family, their education, their employment the community and so on.

A significant number of examples demonstrated a very strong commitment to a collaborative approach in working with stakeholders. However there could be some improvement in the ways in which stakeholders, particularly young people and families and agencies with specialist knowledge and skills are engaged to ensure that it is meaningful and sustainable. There does not appear to be a lot of collaboration between Reconnect services with respect to the sharing of information and specialist knowledge. This may be hampered by the absence of useful methods in which to do this.

Lastly the lack of formal AR training over the last couple of years has made it difficult to replenish those services that have experienced turnover in their staff. This may in part be the reason why there appears to be some slippage in the quality of AR exploration and its implementation over this year.

2. Services perception of AR

The following sections 1 - 4 consider how services are implementing and managing AR, their reflections on AR and its value or usefulness to their service. It is essentially based on the answers services provided to the following questions in their AR self-evaluation reports:

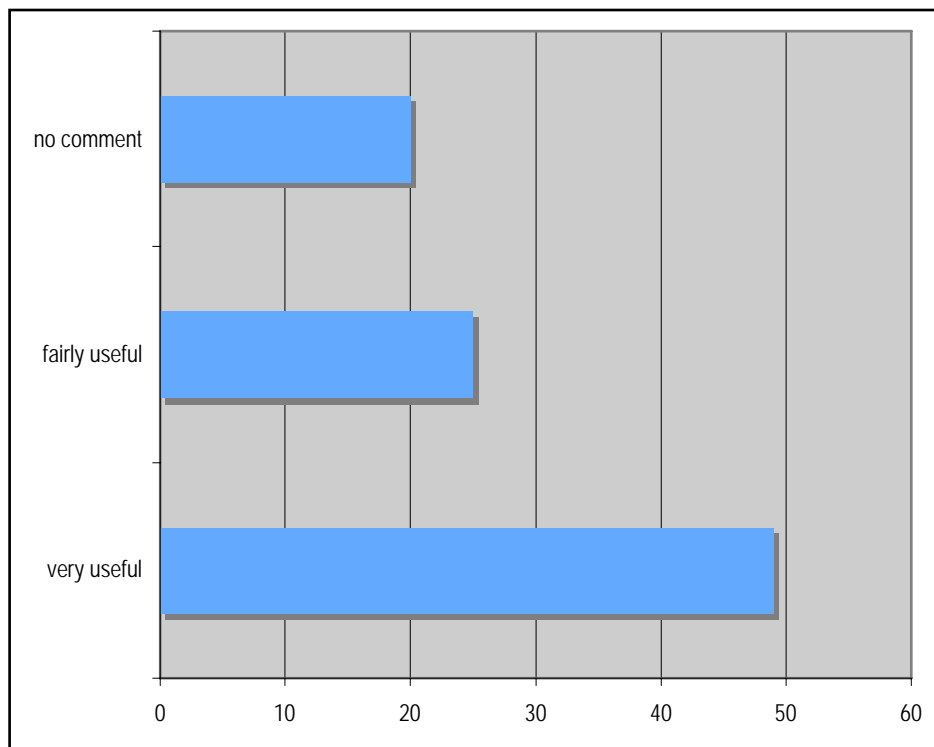
- *How does your service undertake Action Research in your community?*
- *What processes, methods and strategies have you found to be most useful and why?*
- *How has Action Research contributed to services strategies and outcomes and to the development of good practice?*

2.1 Value of AR

Action research has provided a sense of legitimacy for initiatives, which might otherwise have received a low priority. The processes have also necessitated the service to evaluate our program on a regular basis and look at how responsive we are to community needs.

Of those services that offered reflections in their Self Evaluation reports on the implementation of AR 79% rated AR as useful and 49% as very useful. This is a slightly lower percentage but in accordance with the 82% who deemed it useful and 52% who deemed it very useful in the previous year. Figure 1 illustrates services self- assessment of AR within their programs graphically.

Figure 1: Services assessment of AR



A variety of reasons were offered by services as to why they deemed AR as useful, as per the previous year many mentioned that AR necessitated reflective and often

creative practices and ultimately it leads to improved service delivery as one service so succinctly put it;

Action research formalises work practices that welfare workers already utilise, but importantly gives greater weight to reflection. We have found this is a critical component of the ongoing improvement of service delivery to our clients.

A number of these services believe that AR has become integral to their work and that it is in fact one of the defining elements of the Reconnect program.

The other important themes that emerged from services as to why AR is useful included; that it demands partnerships and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders including clients past and present, it also assists in developing new initiatives or refining old ones and lastly that it necessitates accountability and transparency to stakeholders through increased documentation.

2.2 Challenges to AR

Only 28% of services mentioned challenges that they were facing with their AR explorations in their reflections on implementing AR. Similar to last year staff turnover (or the lack of staff) and the amount of time it takes to conduct AR were seen as the biggest challenges to implementing AR in their services. There were 8 services that mentioned the 'lack of time' or the balancing of AR work with other demands on workers time as a major challenge. A further 7 services mentioned the challenges of doing AR with new staff who were often untrained in AR or the lack of staff to actually do AR whilst new staff were being employed. Coupled with this AR can prove difficult when staff are sole workers on sites that are located miles apart from one another.

Many of these services went onto suggest that timely AR training for new staff could in many cases over come this challenge. Several services noted that they had provided their own AR training for staff and this had proved beneficial for keeping AR rigorous in their services. This in house AR training was either provided by external experts in the field of AR or through the experience and knowledge of their own staff.

The documentation of AR was also seen as a barrier by 5 services to the implementation of AR. For one service the documentation of AR was seen as laborious and bureaucratic. For the others it was unclear as to whether it was the amount of time good documentation required or whether it was a lack of knowledge as to the best and most efficient ways that AR could be documented in their services.

3. Managing AR

Keeping the process simple has enabled the service to contain and maintain the projects undertaken. We also work with the view of sustainability i.e.: handing projects back to the community through the sharing of resources and the 'up skilling' of community members.

As was noted in last years AR analysis a structured approach to managing AR seemed to be the most useful way in which AR explorations would be developed and completed. The three most common approaches to managing AR included:

- As a set agenda item at weekly or fortnightly team meetings,
- As a regular AR meeting held monthly or six weekly and/or
- As a set agenda item at Advisory or Reference Group meetings.

For many services a combination of these approaches was used such that AR activities were never forgotten and AR was more easily integrated into everyday practice. Some services delegated specific AR explorations and their development to specific workers to ensure ownership and responsibility. AR was generally incorporated into service planning and evaluation sessions held six monthly or yearly.

Documentation of AR was most regularly completed through meeting minutes or specific AR diaries. For specific AR questions discussed within the team, with stakeholders or reference group members butchers paper was often used for the write up to ensure that all ideas were recorded. Other methods services reported for documenting AR included, journals, anecdotal records of phone calls, meetings, workshops and client comments, photos, artwork and DVD's and written feedback in response to questionnaires and interviews. These methods of AR documentation have been used by services over the last few years. The documentation of AR by services is discussed further in section 8.

A number of services still need to see that AR is a framework, a structure, and a process for assisting service improvement rather than something that is additional. However 5 services noted that AR had become integral to their wider service organisation and not just specific to Reconnect and that this had lead to greater collaboration within the organisation for resolving issues of concern to there community. One service suggested that AR is now integrated into the broader ethos of the agency and has become part of ongoing quality improvement, program development and review and evaluation processes.

4. Impact on Service Models

It is difficult to assess the full impact of AR on service models, as many services did not mention in their reflections changes to their services that were directly related to the implementation of AR. Nor did they always make comment on the way in which AR had improved service delivery and improved outcomes for clients in their actual AR contributions.

However what has become very apparent in services reflections and in their AR contributions is the extent to which stakeholders are included in most AR explorations. In many instances services have identified an issue/s for their potential client base and looked to relevant stakeholders to assist them to investigate the issue/s or concern/s further and jointly move toward solutions. There have been some very good examples of involving stakeholders early on in an AR cycle by services keen to improve the work they do with indigenous and CaLD communities. This involvement

with stakeholders has proved very useful for these services in the building of meaningful working relationships.

It would appear that the involvement of stakeholders in AR is becoming the norm as one service so accurately describes:

Genuine stakeholder involvement has been a challenge of past years but it now appears to be something that happens almost automatically. From the first step in exploring an issue, Reconnect is alert to who else might be interested in the issue, who may already be working on the issue and who might have something to contribute to an exploration of the issue. From a practice perspective, this has influenced the work with young people and their families, our community development activities and our collaborative relationships with other services.

There has also been reported developments or changes to service models through AR explorations. As discussed in Report 2 there were 8 AR questions that employed the use of a new or improved model/framework and 5 that used service reform methods as ways in which to respond to a variety of issues and improve service delivery. Some of these reforms decreased wait times for servicing, improved family sensitive practice, increased the numbers of clients seen at any one time by the service and improved the service's ability to understand and record outcomes for clients.

One of the services using AR in their work with CaLD communities believes that AR has gone beyond just improving service provision inside a particular program and has in fact added real benefits to the wider community. They note the following positive outcomes:

- *Opportunities for services and other stakeholders to undertake collaborative efforts,*
- *Giving structure to a group of stakeholders to inform themselves about particular emerging needs,*
- *Allowing stakeholders to act within their own local area to address need and identify good practice, and*
- *Providing important opportunities for newly arrived young people to actively participate in action research.*

The impact of using an AR process on service models and strategies is elaborated on in greater detail in Report 2.

5. AR Cycle

The themes that relate to the Reconnect Services' understanding and application of AR will be discussed under the following subheadings.

- 5.1 AR questions
- 5.2 Commencement phase for AR
- 5.3 Clarity of AR phases
- 5.4 Continuity of logic
- 5.5 Ending a cycle

5.1 AR questions

The great majority of AR questions that were formed in response to issues that services identified, were framed in a way that generally provided a sense of the issue under investigation.

The number of questions that were tightly focused and articulated very clearly was quite small in number and about equal to the number of questions that were weakly articulated and/or very broad in scope.

It tended to follow that the AR cycles for questions that were well crafted, had appropriate information in each of the AR phases and the continuity of logic was clear and continuous throughout the question. Also the final reflections for these questions also tended to describe in greater detail, the impact that pursuing the question had on the issue that had been identified at the outset.

5.2 Commencement phase for AR

Only a small number of questions did not open their documented question with observations that were either recorded in an *Observe* phase or within a preamble. However some of those that had a preamble which they then followed with Plan, became a little tangled because they were struggling to incorporate in some instances consultations undertaken with other stakeholders as well as their reflections, within the Plan phase. In some instances people tried to compensate by following the Plan phase with Reflect and then Action, which then impacted on the continuity of logic.

As has been emphasised in previous reports, there can be significant value in commencing with a description of the observations that have informed the view that an issue exists. These observations can provide a reference point against which the final reflections can be compared. For example if the original observation includes the statistic that only twenty per cent of the service users are young men then at the end of the cycle there is an opportunity for assessing whether or not this figure has been impacted on.

Having a clear set of observations can also provide a stronger basis for reflection, which in turn can lead to a more appropriate set of actions.

5.3 Clarity of AR phases

The AR phases refers to the individual components of the cycle as in Observe, Reflect, Plan, and Act. The clarity of these phases is assessed according to the appropriateness of the information to that phase and whether or not the different points within a phase could be readily understood.

About two thirds of the questions that were answered were satisfactory through to very clear in the way that they were recorded. Overall about twenty per cent of questions were answered such that the information in each phase was very clear. A further 20 per cent had not used the phases in documenting their AR questions.

Whilst it is not necessary to use the phases for every AR question, there is still value in using the AR cycle as a framework to guide the process that is followed when investigating an issue. That is it is important to ensure that you have collected observations which can tell you whether or not a particular issue is of significance and then to provide space to reflect on these and so on. Each phase is an important part of fleshing out the response to an issue and making sense of how effective that response has been.

5.4 Continuity of logic

The term “Continuity of Logic” is used in this report to describe the capacity of a documented cycle to demonstrate how each phase is linked to and follows on from the previous phase such that there is a train of thought that can be tracked from beginning to end. This in no way precludes a change in direction or the creation of spin-off questions, rather it just requires that it be clear as to why a change in direction has occurred or new questions have emerged. It was not a requirement that the cycle be documented within the phases for an AR question to demonstrate this.

Of the questions that were reported on, about three quarters demonstrated some sense of continuity in thinking from the identification of the initial issue through to the final phase. One quarter did this in a way that was very clear whilst a similar number lacked the capacity to effectively demonstrate this.

5.5 Ending a cycle

In each instance, the ending of a cycle was assessed for whether or not it made any substantial comment on the AR question that was being pursued. That is, did the action that was implemented have any impact on the original issue that was investigated? If for example the issue at the outset was a perceived need for more young men to take up the services offered by Reconnect, did this happen? If it didn't why didn't it? Was there a change in thinking about the issue on the basis of further observations that were gathered during the implementation of the cycle? What could be tried differently in the future?

This was an area that was not as strong as some of the other areas described previously with just over half provided some degree of thoughtful commentary at the end of the cycle whilst the remainder either lacked any final reflections or were insubstantial in their insight about either the issue or the process. They often lacked summaries of the observations provided by key stakeholders such as young people, family members, schools or other stakeholders,

6. Working with Stakeholders

Three quarters of Reconnect services have worked with other stakeholders in addressing AR questions. It was noted in the 2006 Process Report that this was beginning to be a feature of AR, so it is encouraging to see it continue.

The main stakeholders that Reconnect services have worked with are local schools. Other organisations that are responding to similar issues such as mental health, domestic violence, juvenile justice or issues that are culturally specific, form the next largest group of stakeholders. The nature of the relationships has included collaboration, seeking the insights of specialist services, encouraging the provision of referrals and consultation.

Young people were involved as active stakeholders to a lesser extent and parents least of all. This was generally done through surveys, which in some instances sought parental views on what information on topics such as parenting or drugs. There were some examples of groups that were developed in consultation with the young people that they were targeted at.

Consideration should be given to how stakeholders can be more meaningfully involved in each of the AR phases in a cycle. For example there were times when a service tackled an issue that is the province of a specialist service such as a mental health service and they actively consulted whilst others have chose to try and address these issues on their own. This was also true of other issues such as family violence.

7. Other sources of information

Eleven organisations cited other sources of information that they had drawn on that had been gained from searching the Internet, or by investigating local service and demographic data. The remainder had worked with other providers that had specialist knowledge, which they had actively taken advantage of or had included through a collaborative approach to an AR question.

It continues to be an area that is significantly underdone, even from the perspective of Reconnect sharing with Reconnect. The need for an effective mechanism for sharing the work of Reconnect services has been highlighted in the reports produced over the past three years and it continues to be an issue.

There are many reasons why services should be drawing on other sources of information including the improved quality of service delivery that can be developed on the basis of previous successful attempts elsewhere or the strengthening of practitioners' knowledge through the introduction of new frameworks for dealing with significant issues such as violence in the family, the hurdles that can be avoided on the basis of lessons learnt elsewhere, and so on.

8. Documentation

Five services commented on the challenge that they experience with documenting their AR. One of the examples of documentation referred to this year is a DVD produced by Kumangka, which captured the cultural journey of a group of young indigenous people that went on a camp that focused on traditional cultural activities. The young people filmed, edited, and developed the credits and soundtrack for the film. It became both a means of documenting the process as well as a skill building exercise for the young people. This was true of other organisations as well.

The challenge however is that whatever process is used to capture the AR question, it still needs to be able to incorporate both the strengths and the areas that could be further developed or should be dropped altogether. It also needs to be able to record the larger outcomes such as a young person's connection with family, community, education, training or employment and/or establishment of safe accommodation and so on.

9. Sustainability

For many services the sustainability of AR continues to be problematic. As mentioned previously staff turnover in Reconnect services continues to challenge the notion of regular and continuous AR explorations. It would seem that in some services when experienced practitioners leave a service and have been involved for sometime in driving AR the momentum around AR can stall and at times even fall over.

In other services where AR has become the joint responsibility of all practitioners this is less likely to occur. From what has been reported by services it would seem that the confidence to develop and implement AR by staff stems from effective AR training and/or experience alongside actually practicing it in an environment committed to it.

There has been no national AR training for Reconnect staff since 2005 and this appears to have had an impact on those services less confident in its application. Bi annual national AR training for Reconnect Staff is an important measure for ensuring that AR knowledge is continuously learnt and/or built on thus ensuring a level of sustainability around it's practise in services.

On a more positive note as stated in section 3 there were 5 services who reported that AR exploration was now embedded into the philosophy of their larger organisations and this has lead to the increased likelihood for sustainability as AR has become part of their continuous quality improvement programs.

10. Recommendations

Porter Orchard and Associates are commissioned by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to collate, analyse and report on the information provided by Reconnect services in the Action Research (AR) section of their 2005/06 Self Evaluation Reports (SERs). As part of this service Porter Orchard and Associates offers recommendations to the Department and the Action Research Committee. Some of the recommendations that Porter Orchard & Associates put forth this year relate to Training, AR Website, Action Research Kit, Feedback and Terminology. The Department and the ARC Committee are considering the recommendations provided by Porter Orchard & Associates.