

National Action Research Training for Reconnect and  
Home Advice, Sydney, November 10-12 2004

*If you drove a car like this  
you'd have an accident ...*

Why action research? ... and what  
is it anyway?

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The following notes are the text from Powerpoint slides used in the plenary session Wednesday morning 10 November 2004. Any queries should be directed to Dr Phil Crane at [p.crane@qut.edu.au](mailto:p.crane@qut.edu.au)

## Shifting landscape of social programs

- In recent years there has been considerable interest in:
  - Evidence-based practice (scientific knowledge)
  - Specifying service delivery outcomes
  - Quality assurance and continuous improvement
  - Action research
- What is this about?
  - A manifestation of ‘the contract state’?
  - A search for new forms of public sector accountability
  - Shifting approaches to governance (bureaucratic, market, participatory)

## Early intervention and homelessness

- The target issue (homelessness) is caused by a complex of factors
- Early intervention is one preventative strategy amongst a continuum of necessary responses
- Early intervention cannot be prescriptive (or method driven). Rather it needs to respond to the cluster of factors facing particular individuals, families, and communities
- Successful early intervention relies on there being a range of pathways to assistance through ‘first-to-know’ agencies
- Building early intervention capacity in a particular locality/ community is more than simply providing a specific EI service
- To be relevant and responsive this needs the active involvement of people who understand a particular context including service users

## Why include action research as a key component of early intervention programs?

- To improve the situations of the people that social programs are supposed to assist
- It provides a process tool for a range of ‘players’ to develop well-founded strategies for responding to complex social situations
- It can make a contribution to better outcomes that other forms of inquiry cannot

## Types of inquiry

- Action Inquiry Processes
  - Reflective practice
  - Participatory action research
  - Organisationally driven improvement processes
  - Focused on both better understanding ***and*** improvement
- Traditional Research
  - ‘Scientific’, linear and detached (objective)
  - Focused only on better understandings

## Through cycles of ...

Observe- reflect- plan- act- observe- reflect- plan- act- observe .....

# Reflective Practice

Concrete reflection: practical focus

- What's working?
- What's not working?
- What should be done differently?
- Critical reflection: challenges the attitudes, values and assumptions that underpin our practice
  - Eg How does our cultural/ personal/ social vantage point influence how we see a practice situation
- *A way of working that includes ongoing critical thinking and sees service provision as an evolving process (Quixley 1998).*

## Core elements of reflective practice

- Use of cycles
- Questioning approach which suspends judgement and observes/ listens deeply
- Involves engaging/ networking with key people and organisations in the practice environment
- Good interpersonal and group skills
- Cultural awareness and cross cultural competencies

## Reflective practice

- Positions the worker at the centre of the reflective process
  - Tends to only involve other workers/practitioners in the process of reflection
  - Seeks improvement whilst also maintaining professional status
  - Can mean AR is no more than worker debriefing and planning (either individually or in agency teams/ inter-agency groups)

## Top down review and inquiry processes

- Where the organisation and it's management are at the centre ('drive') the inquiry process eg
  - Organisational review and planning processes
  - Quality assurance
  - Organisationally driven 'continuous improvement'
  - Technical action research: where management or academics determine the questions to be pursued

## Like other forms of AR, participatory action research

...

- Has dual goals of improved understanding + change in people's situation
- Asks action questions- *What would it take to ... ?* where larger questions are broken down into smaller intermediate questions
- Grounded and flexible whilst seeking well-founded change
- Ethically undertaken

## **Participatory Action Research**

- Research 'with' not 'on'
- Involving those affected by a situation/ practice

Where stakeholders are treated as experts and their involvement maximised

## Participatory Action Research is ...

- Multi-level
- A 'dance' between larger and smaller questions/ actions
- Culturally inclusive
- Ongoing
- About becoming embedded in everyday practice
- Valuing of actions that don't work (as sources of insight)

## Participatory Action Research

- About developing **well-founded** understandings to base new actions on
- This can be called **rigour**
- In action research this requires us to go beyond reflective practice and engage in a **systematic process of investigation and critical review** of what we say we have found out

## ... that is **ethically undertaken**

- Building and respecting relationships (see National Health and Medical Council *Values and Ethics - Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research* – see link on ReconnectAR website)
- Traditional research ethics
  - Informed consent
  - Appropriate levels of confidentiality
  - Not treating people as a means to an end

## Developing and sustaining AR

- In a service
- In an organisation
- At the local level
- At the program level
  
- The notion of an '**Action Researching System**'
  
- Is our AR simply undertaken to improve local practice or do we want to contribute to broader improvements?

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...

- There is more than one driver
- You sometimes have to change direction quickly
- You may have to head in two or three directions at once
- Lots of people won't understand what you are doing and may park on the road or attempt to stop you
- Accidents are seen as sources of learning rather than to be avoided at all costs
- Enjoy the ride!