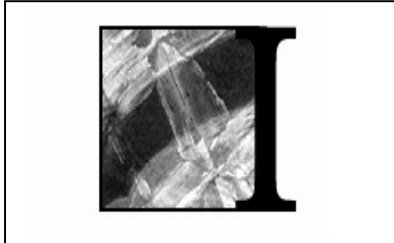


# Chapter Five: the edge of the map

*The only way to find  
the limits of the possible  
is to go beyond them,  
to the impossible*

*Arthur C Clarke*





## ***Introduction***

Action research is emancipatory, it leads not just to new practical knowledge, but to new abilities to create knowledge. In action research knowledge is a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience; it is a verb rather than a noun. (Reason & Bradbury 2001, p.2)

On the website Arteology, Routio (2001) suggests that the success of action research projects should not be measured with the criteria used with other forms of descriptive research but by comparing the results with the objectives of the project itself. With in educational arena it is proposed that the validity of action research projects can be measured by their usefulness as a model for others explorations. (Elliot 1989)

Below is an evaluation of the process of this research through a comparison of the activities with the objectives we set at the beginning of the project. And a reflection on the usefulness of action research as a methodology for the arts and cultural sector. I finish with some concluding remarks about the 'knowledge' generated through the project. It is the growing, changing knowledge described in the quote above as a verb, and hence I describe the process of the concluding remarks rather than outlining a set of conclusions.



## ***valuation of process***

The original aims of the action research workshops were to:

- ***Introduce action research (AR) to the arts sector.***
- ***Trial participatory action research (PAR) as an appropriate methodology when working in groups within the arts sector.***
- ***Identify and refine the participants' major issues arising from decision-making processes.***
- ***Trial group action planning as a tool for exploring issues.***

These aims became my starting points for evaluation and reflection.

I first wanted to ***introduce action research to the arts sector.*** At least 119 artswokers have gained understanding of the process of action research. The level of understanding ranges from members of the arts sector group who filled out the matrix and received a potted history of the project outlining the action research process we had undertaken; through workshop participants who undertook their own action research cycles; to one participant who has now undertaken her own action research project. A number of people have also heard about the methodology through my presentations at conferences. The fact that the participants were 'self-selecting' could have been seen as a limitation to attracting a wide cross section of those working in the arts sector. In action research the participants

however, must be committed to achieve so a degree of self-selection was inevitable. Although a broad mix of artforms and skills were represented in the action research workshops, the participants who were most involved tended to be those with community cultural development experience. Artforms that are collective in nature such as the performing arts and community arts were also dominant.

I also wanted to ***trial participatory action research (PAR) as an appropriate methodology when working in groups*** within the arts sector. The feedback from participants was positive to PAR as a methodology and as a process for undertaking both artwork and research. I personally found the process adaptable, flexible and appropriate to a variety of settings within the arts sector. It has a logic that feels familiar and is easily adaptable to artform and collective explorations. The one unsuccessful workshop was however illustrative of the difficulties of introducing a group-based methodology into a hierarchy where artswomen have been instructed to attend when they are already feeling stretched for time and resources. The workshops for which participants chose to give up an evening or afternoon were much more conducive to good group work. More time would be required to work with hierarchical organisations to successfully introduce AR to their workplaces.

We aimed to ***identify and refine the participants' major issues arising from decision-making processes***. A large amount of data about decision-making was generated through the workshop process. However, action research allowed for it to be successfully distilled, ratified and prioritized by participants. The comparisons between the workshop group and the arts sector group show that in most areas the action research workshop group were representative of the wider arts sector. They were able to identify and refine issues that were not only important to them but also to the wider arts and cultural sector. It became evident that time restraints were the only thing holding back a dedicated group of participants from further involvement. We initiated a flexible approach to the refining of issues to allow for as much involvement as possible. It was suggested that multiple ways for input by adding email chats or solo feedback forms could have been beneficial.

We endeavored to *trial group action planning processes*. Feedback from participants suggests that the simple strategic planning format undertaken by them as group action planning was not only very useful but more interesting than other strategic planning they had been involved in. Again issues around time were raised as the element that limited ongoing involvement in action planning. While an ideal situation would be for all the participants to be involved in long-term collaborations and with all aspects of the project, realistically this is not going to happen. Making time to get together with peers for discussion was seen as of major importance to the participants but finding time to make group meetings was a major issue. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that I had a majority of freelance artswomen. If the action research process had been occurring within a workplace, the issue of time would not have been a problem.



### ***Reflection on the usefulness of methodology***

In earlier chapters it was identified that this project needed a methodology that was appropriate to a unique context. A number of points were identified as necessary. They stated that the methodology needed to:

- *cope with diversity*
- *be appropriate for practitioners*
- *encourage an active approach*
- *empower its participants*
- *act as an agent of change*
- *recognise group work*
- *address current deficiencies in arts research by looking at the big picture*

- *be seen as valid to the academic community*
- *be useful to the arts community*

The ability to *cope with diversity* was evident in the fact that the participants were from a variety of positions within the arts sector. These ranged from arts managers and bureaucrats to educators and artworkers from a variety of different mediums. There was also a diversity of age, experience and artforms. Further diversity was limited, however, by the self-selection of the participants. Information about people's cultural backgrounds was not collected. Approximately one quarter of the workshop participants was male. This improved slightly with three out of eight of the ratification group being male. Information on gender was not collected from the arts sector group, as the matrices were not attributed. Although pursued there was limited cultural diversity within the participant groups. This means the groups were not representative of the broader Australian community. They may however be representative of the arts sector. Alternatively they may be representative of the artworkers who are willing to play active roles in research. More work would be needed to fully understand this situation.

I believe the process we undertook was *appropriate for practitioners*. The cyclic nature of action research allows for a responsive approach for participants. Feedback from artworkers involved indicated an inherent understanding and appreciation for the logical approach of action research. Some felt that it is similar to their own artmaking process. Lack of time was the most evident limitation for involvement by practitioners.

We undertook a very *active approach*. The methodology encouraged activity and movement through the use of cycles. The format of the workshop tried different ways of developing ideas and collecting data. This ensured that the process had no chance of becoming stagnant. I believe this 'activeness' also encouraged an *empowerment of participants*. The methodology was inclusive and educative in its processes and offered many opportunities for the empowerment of participants. Feedback suggests that a number felt they left the workshop process with tools they could use immediately in their arts practice. Feedback also suggests that a degree of demystification occurred in relation

to participants' view of academic processes. A number of new networks have formed through the variety of participants that met through the workshop process. Empowerment is however a long-term process and the results of this may not be evident for a long period of time.

The empowerment of the participants could also suggest that our process could be seen as an *agent of change*. The cyclic nature of the methodology encouraged change to occur as a valid part of the process. Small changes have occurred over the researching of this thesis as the information regarding the usefulness of action research has spread. Unfortunately, within the larger arts organisation workshops, the participants were from lower positions within the hierarchy. Had we been able to attract people in positions of power, organisational change may have been easier to achieve.

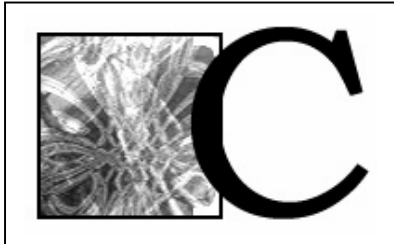
There was a *recognition of group work* by the participants. The workshop process was dependent on good group work. And some participants commented on their joy at being in a supportive environment. Some visual artists, however felt that the hardest part was interacting with other artists in a group setting, and they wondered if something may be missing in their training.

A *big picture view* was encouraged throughout the whole process. The topics covered within the workshop process inspired big picture thinking and the participants were always roused to broaden their views by changing contexts.

The journey of my thesis may indicate that this kind of research can be seen as *valid in the academic community*. I also consider that the work has been useful to the academy as a bridge between academics and practitioners.

The *usefulness to the arts community* will need to be judged in the longer term. Feedback from the workshops outlined immediate usefulness of the skills and tools that were acquired through the process. Presentations at conferences and publications have raised awareness and discussion within the arts community. The acceptance of the arts

community of the finished thesis will suggest a willingness to embrace an academic approach to practitioner arts research.



### ***concluding remarks***

In the introduction to this thesis I worried about the fact that I felt that my decision making was occurring using a set of criteria that were so far removed from the primary practice of making art that the process stopped being meaningful. And I asked 'How can we make our decision-making processes more balanced?'

As I arrive at the edge of the map on this thesis journey I need to stop and ask 'Do I still feel the same?' and 'Have I contributed to more balanced decision-making?'

I do feel that our decision-making processes still need to be examined more closely. That rather than a single map we need a book of maps, each of a different scale. For although more up-close research into specific artforms or decision-making processes would be beneficial, I also came to realise that this is a huge issue, bigger than me and my artmaking, bigger in fact than the arts sector. In fact it is looming as a major issue in most decision-making all over the world. When I turn on the radio I hear the problems in health sector and I recognise the key issues I have been exploring in the arts sector. A health professional discusses the moral dilemma she faces in speaking of a recent job, for her professional ethics clash with a secrecy clause in her work contract. The television shows the destruction of village life in the highlands of New Guinea and I want to jump up and down and say 'don't you realise that the key stakeholders have no voice in this decision-making process'. I hear a well-known journalist lament the restrictions placed on

his work by the economic drivers of media ownership. Both medical and educational professionals are currently talking about the difference between professional ethical requirements and commercial interests of their employers. I see all these people confronting similar issues to myself. They too are in situations where the decisions they are making or that are being made for them, are based on a set of criteria that is removed from their primary professional practice.

So, although I am still concerned about the unbalanced nature of our decision-making processes, I am aware that there are many minds now puzzling over possible avenues for improvement. And in assessing my contribution I can say that I have worked hard at making change and will continue to do so. I can take pride in the fact that I have introduced action research to a sector that is in need of a methodological framework and that I have drafted an accessible map that illustrates not only the journey of this research but also suggests other roads for other quests. A number of artswomen came on the journey and responded positively to the experience.

The usefulness of action research to the arts and cultural sector will however, only become evident in its long-term use by arts workers. The reach so far has been limited to artswoman participants and followers of this research. The links between art and action research in Australia have until recently been very small. Today however there is a growing network of artswomen who are using the term and endeavoring to incorporate action research into their practice. There is also growing awareness of the term within funding bodies in Australia. This is evident in the new partnership between University of Technology, Sydney and the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council. They are forging links to establish academic research in the community cultural development sector and are exploring appropriate methodological approaches.

In the past 18 months I have spoken at conferences in the areas of community cultural development, arts in health, mental health, history, education and social action. In all these presentations I have described the use of action research as a tool in the development of arts and cultural practices. I have also made contact with those in the

Health, Education and Social Action sectors who have an understanding of action research and cultural practice.

It can also be noted that Ollie Black, freelance theatre worker and previous artistic director of both Vitalstatistix Women's Theatre and Port Youth Theatre has received a theatre fellowship from the Australia Council. Black will be using an action research methodology for her professional development. She was introduced to action research through our workshops described above.

Action research is now included in the philosophy module of the Graduate Diploma in Community Cultural Development run by Community Art Network South Australia (CAN SA). CAN SA hosted one of my early Data Collection Workshops and have closely followed and reported on my research ever since. So the advocacy work in this area is now underway. It is time to ponder what comes next?

In depth studies involving both arts organizations and individual artists, using both conventional and action research methodologies could give further insight into decision-making processes and broaden the concept of participation in decision-making. A range of maps needs to be created- in a variety of styles and scales. And they need to be accessible so they are useful for those working in the arts and cultural sectors. For beneficial change to occur within decision-making processes there needs to be active and well-informed contributions by those working within the sector.

My research through the literature on functions of art in society, my examination of the current issues and the reflections on the arts sector, fueled the journey of my action research. My discovery of AR as an appropriate methodology and my use of PAR in the process of the journey demonstrate in its outcomes, that PAR does compliment Freire's actual ideas in application.

I intend to continue my research into finding a better balance in my decision-making, in the context of my arts practice.