Action Research as Ethical Practice:
Coordinating Voices, Expanding Possibilities

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Introduction

All that we do creates some sort of relationship with others and with our environment. The question remains: what kind of relation are we crafting? Action research, with its emphasis on collaboration among researchers and community members (co-researchers), attempts to generate forms of practice that are useful for that specific community rather than provide a singular answer to a social challenge. This sort of relationship is distinct from the long-standing tradition of research that positions an expert researcher as providing objectively produced discoveries concerning social issues. One might say, in fact, that action research embraces an ethic of discursive potential – that is, an ethic of expanding the possibilities for those involved in the research endeavor as well as expanding whose voices are heard. This chapter focuses on ethics in action research seen from a relational constructionist stance and presents two illustrative examples.

Research as a Relational Process

In their pivotal volume, *Laboratory life: The social construction of scientific facts*, Latour and Woolgar (1979) challenged the idea that scientific research is about discovery. They also challenged the notion that research (science) is a cognitive process. Rather, they proposed that research is an embodied cultural practice. Their ethnographic research in the laboratory demonstrated that what emerges from scientific research as Truth and Fact, is actually the byproduct of social coordination. And yet, four decades later we are still shrouded by the notion that scientific research makes discoveries of what is really there in nature. To be sure, research about the physical world does yield "results." But how those results come to be labeled, categorized, discussed and deployed into everyday life requires people (scientists) negotiating

with each other. What comes to be identified as a discovery is, as Latour and Woolgar observed, a socially constructed reality.

Does this mean that scientific research is useless? Not at all. We must shift our understanding of research from a process of discovery to a process of construction *and* social transformation. In so doing, we recognize research as a critical contribution to our understanding of how we might shape our world and our lives. We also might come to recognize that research offers so much more than static discoveries; it offers practical means for making important choices concerning the unfolding understanding of our worlds.

Gergen (2014) advocates for research as "future forming." Research does not provide a map of "what is there;" it offers descriptions of how things might be. In that regard, we could say that research is more about social transformation than about uncovering the stabilities of life. To view research as transformative, is to consider the ways in which engaging in research processes, as well as reading research reports, provides us with new ways of understanding our worlds. In turn, these new ways of understanding our worlds open the door to new possibilities for human engagement. One form of research that has embraced this transformative and future forming view, is action research.

Action research, with its emphasis on collaboration, participation, and unfolding processes, represents a significant shift from traditional understandings of objective, scientific research. As noted, traditional notions of research are focused on discovering essential aspects of the world. Yet, from a relational constructionist stance (McNamee, 2010; McNamee & Hosking, 2012), what we come to know about the material, physical world is bound by language, and language is social. The physical world exists, but how we talk about it and how we make meaning of it is contingent upon our negotiated languaging practices. To identify one's stomach pain as a virus as opposed to punishment from God is not a naturally occurring distinction between science and religion but is a distinction borne out of different socially negotiated languaging communities (McNamee, 2015). As we engage with others in interaction, we create all that is meaningful (Gergen, 2009).

Language as Constitutive

The constructionist focus on language is important. Language does not represent the world; it does not "name" what is "on our minds" or "out there in the world." Language constructs the

world. As we name, we simultaneously create constraints and possibilities. The minute I identify something as beautiful, it is not ugly. We cannot avoid drawing distinctions as we speak and act. But more important is the recognition that the distinctions we draw emerge from the language communities (Wittgenstein, 1953) of which we are a part.

Action researchers do not presume to know how the communities they work with understand the phenomenon to be explored. They position themselves as curious partners who bring their own understandings of the situation with an eagerness to multiply that understanding with community members' own diverse narratives. There is an attempt to embrace multiplicity and complexity. Traditional research, on the other hand, seeks a singular answer and a common social order (cf, McNamee & Hosking, 2012; McNamee, 2014; McNamee, 2010).

Thus, in embracing a view of language practices as central to creating our worlds, relational constructionists view research also as a process of constructing a world. The research process is not immune from the co-creative processes of social interaction. Research *is* a form of social interaction, as Latour and Woolgar (1979) have so convincingly argued. This holds for traditional research as well as contemporary alternatives like action research. When we approach our inquiry processes with assumptions of objectivity, control, and discovery, we create a very specific sort of world. It is a world where the voice of research (often referred to as "science") has authority. But, we have choices in how we engage in constructing our worlds. We can also participate in the language community where research is viewed as a participatory process. In this world, there are no research "subjects" and no "objective" researchers. Rather, there are research participants or co-researchers who together design research questions, methods, analyses, and outcomes. Many (cf, McNamee & Hosking, 2012; McNamee, 2014) refer to this latter research world as "relational research." While that is a fitting description, we must remember that there are relationships being established in traditional research worlds as well. We can refer to those relationships as subject/object relationships, characterized by "hard differentiation" between researcher and researched (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p. 25). Constructionism, in general, and action research, in particular, is focused on *relational processes* marked by soft self-other differentiation (McNamee and Hosking, 2012, p. 37). Thus, while all research establishes some form of relationship, action research emerges within the soft self-other distinction of constructionism and focuses on relational processes rather than entities or objects.

A relational focus not only alters our assumptions about the researcher/researched relationship but also our questions and interests. A key issue concerns the kind of realities that we contribute to in our research. What sort of world do we invite each other into when we assume realities are local, situated, historical, and cultural co-constructions? This approach to research centers our focus on social transformation as opposed to discovery. Research is understood as creating new understandings of the world rather than uncovering the way the world "really is."

Action research provides the possibility to engage others (theorists, practitioners, researchers, as well as all social actors) in activities that broaden our resources for social life. We recognize that the very *practice* of research might open up different possibilities. Research can be viewed as a *performance* that literally puts into action, and thus makes available, new relational resources. This is why we must reconsider – like everything else – the ways in which relational research in general, and action research in particular, is ethical action.

In a traditional research world, the researcher attempts to uncover some truth about the world, to make a discovery, and to do so guided by the ethic of objectivity (see Woolgar, 1996 and McNamee & Hosking, 2012 for a discussion of this research tradition). In action research, the researcher engages with a community, an organization, or a group to co-create a desired and useful transformation. As argued, social science research does not simply describe the world "as it is;" it creates the world in which we live (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Law, 2004; and Gergen, 2014). This transformation is guided by an ethic of discursive potential (McNamee, 2015).

Ethics as Discursive Potential

What is meant by discursive potential? To answer this question, we must first explore the notion of discourse. To Foucault (1972), discourses are "practices which form the objects of which they speak." In other words, discourses are our taken-for-granted ways of talking and acting. If someone asks you why you have said or done something in particular and your answer is, "Because that's the way it's done!" you know you are referring to a dominant discourse. Discourses can be understood as our unquestioned ways of being in the world. For example, in some cultures or communities, it is presumed that women can only be fulfilled if they have children. Such a presumption is a discourse to the extent that it remains unquestioned and embraced within the community. When I describe a relational ethic as an ethic of discursive

potential, I am proposing that action research (in the present case) is relationally ethical when it expands the array of discourses with which participants can engage; they are no longer trapped within a singular discursive option.

The Relational Ethic of Discursive Potential in Action Research

How does action research achieve this relational ethic of discursive potential? First, action research embraces, in John Shotter's (2010) words, "withness thinking" as opposed to "aboutness thinking." There is no researcher/researched distinction; rather, there are research collaborators, participants, or co-researchers. Processes are designed that invite multiple views on what is of concern to the community, how this concern is viewed, and what might be done to look more deeply into the topic of concern. This focus on working *with* community members insures that it is not solely the researcher's voice that dominates. The researcher is no longer the only expert; community members are acknowledged as local experts who work together with the researcher who also brings his or her expertise. The expertise of the researcher might include ways to initiate the engagement of participants, the recording of the process, and the sharing of "results." Whatever the expertise of the researcher, it is the focus on working with a community that expands the discursive potential of all involved, thereby creating the conditions for multiple ways of understanding the situation and responding to it.

Second, action research is not centered on discovering what is "really" going on in the community. Instead, action research focuses attention on what might be useful to members of the community. This focus requires all involved in the research process to negotiate the various understandings, priorities, and desires. To that end, action research embraces the constructionist priority on utility as opposed to Truth. In so doing, action research avoids the typical "expert solutions" that emerge from most traditional research, solutions that are quite often transplanted from some other context with little to no regard for the local circumstances. Action research is interested in what community members find useful in transforming their current situation. And, since there are likely many voices involved with many different notions about how to achieve social change, action research, again, expands the possible discourses – forms of practice – that might be utilized by the community.

Discursive Potential in Action Research

There are many illustrations of action research and I have no doubt that each one offers a strong case for a relational ethic. Ethical practice in the context of diverse and competing moral orders requires the ability to bring disparate ideas and practices into the conversation in ways that are *curious rather than judgmental*, thereby opening the possibility for coordination among multiple and competing moral orders. Ethical practice also invites participants to depart from their singular understandings and explore, instead, the multiplicity of possible voices they already hold but neglect to draw upon given the well-coordinated rituals they have crafted with others. Also, selecting a research method as a *practical option* for action (as opposed to the correct option) enhances our ability to be relationally engaged. We become sensitive to the stories of community members, as well as our own, in ways that allow us to be responsive and therefore, relationally responsible (McNamee and Gergen, 1999). When we are relationally responsible, we are attentive to the process of relating, itself. This form of responsibility is in contrast to individual responsibility where we hold ourselves and others accountable for our singular actions. The distinction between individual and relational responsibility can be summarized as the distinction between a focus on individual actions as opposed to a focus on interactive processes. The following summary of two action research projects serve as illustrations.

Expanding Possibilities within the Brazilian Healthcare System

The healthcare system in Brazil has undergone extensive reform over the last few decades. One major aspect of this reform has been the attempt to humanize services, thereby creating a better environment for professional-patient interaction. The assumption has been that an enhanced provider-client relationship would contribute significantly to personal, community, and ultimately, national well-being. Thus, many efforts have been initiated to explore professional-user relationships and new practices and methods for healthcare delivery.

In an attempt to be more collaborative, there has been an emphasis on community-based healthcare and its form of delivery. Collaborative here refers to the attention given to developing forms of health-related intervention with the involvement of the entire community that are, consequently, coherent with local values, beliefs, and practices. Through this collaborative process, more interaction, focusing on quality of life between health professionals and users, has been encouraged. The goal has been to establish relationships that facilitate the process of care, thereby creating a collaborative work environment, fostering an atmosphere of cultural

sensitivity, and promoting a sense of attachment, participation (Camargo-Borges and Japur, 2005), and relational responsibility (McNamee and Gergen, 1999).

The objective has been to be more relationally oriented and thus healthcare professionals have been challenged to move beyond their analytical and practical skills (content) and develop sensitivity to more collaborative and relational modes of practice (process). There is a gap between traditional training in techniques and skills, such as diagnosis and treatment, and training in understanding the complexity of human communication processes (Camargo-Borges and Cardoso, 2005).

Camargo-Borges and Cardoso (2005) demonstrated that the critical ingredient for maintaining community member/professional involvement in healthcare had little to do with content and was, instead, dependent upon creating a conversational space wherein *all* participants – professionals and healthcare users – could remain relationally engaged. Extending this work, Camargo-Borges (2007) followed the meetings of one healthcare group located within a Family Healthcare Program in a major city in Brazil. This particular group – the hypertension group – had been identified by the health professionals as an extremely successful group. It had been meeting consistently for three years, while other similarly organized groups (e.g., a diabetes group, a diet group, a women's group) had disbanded as soon as the healthcare professional had provided all of her/his professional knowledge about the group's health concerns.

The hypertension group was composed of users of the Center and a diverse group of health professionals who would rotate after some weeks in the group, depending on their interest to discuss different subjects. As a group, they were initially created to help people suffering from the chronic disease of hypertension. Interestingly, it quickly transformed into a group focused on general, daily issues. In this way, group members and health professionals were invited into a wide variety of discourses that, while not directly related to hypertension, expanded the possible ways in which health could be improved. Any subject of interest to the members was engaged by all participants, regardless of the topic's connection to traditional health related issues. For example, it was not at all unusual for this group to organize parties and meals for the community as a whole, to practice and perform dance, or to plan a cooking class where participants could learn how to prepare a nutritious and tasty meal for under one Brazilian Real (approximately 57 cents at the time of the research). Thus, despite the intent of meeting for purposes of informing patients about their disease (hypertension) and medications, this specific group enjoyed

consistent and stable membership and the group functioned well beyond the limited discourse of hypertension. Additionally, all users of the local health care program were welcomed to participate with this group, despite their lack of affiliation with the formal purpose of the group. In this way, the group was acknowledged as an important group whose activities improved the health of the overall community.

Camargo-Borges (2007) engaged in participatory action research with the hypertension group in an attempt to understand how this group managed to create enduring and useful discussions and activities for the community (as well as for their own health). She was interested in examining what made this group so successful, how they became central in improving the health of the community at large, and what it was about their interactions that invited such an unusual and wide-sweeping contributions such that both health professionals and health service users sought their advice. It was her anticipation that engaging in action research with this group would both offer the group the opportunity to explore how they managed to be so successful as well as offer the extended health service and community resources for further success in all areas of healthcare.

Camargo-Borges participated in the group's weekly meetings. She recorded each meeting, produced transcripts which she used to examine how this group was able to open multiple discursive possibilities. Her analysis, shared with the group members, made visible how the unfolding interaction among professionals and users expanded the possible resources for confronting health and healthcare (i.e., expanding the discursive potential).

The group established a pattern of "open conversation." That is, they established an implicit rule – in concert with the health professionals – that any topic was legitimate to discuss. The topic for discussion at each meeting was negotiated by all participants. The group maintained their identity as the "hypertension group" by taking blood pressure readings collectively at the end of each meeting as well as by following each person's treatment needs. Regardless of one's health record, the reading was taken, with everyone – the professionals and participants together – using the appropriate measurements. And yet, the main topic of discussion could be anything of concern to group members and often led to external activities within the community that promoted health (e.g., dance, cooking, and exercise classes).

Not surprisingly, this group was recognized as a group where any new information within the broader community (as well as within the health center) could be discussed. Advice about

setting up new activities for the community were frequently sought from this group. It would be fair to say that people – professionals and community members alike – approached this group when they had information, ideas, or questions that might potentially affect the entire community.

A transcript of a brief interaction that took place during one meeting will help illustrate the features of expanding discursive potential. The central focus of this case is on the responsivity of group participants (professionals and users) to each other. For example, the striking difference in this group's interaction is the way in which the professional (a pharmacist) positions herself in relation to the group members. She is both expert and learner.

This excerpt is from a meeting attended by ten users/patients and four health professionals. One of the health professionals is a pharmacist, invited by the group, to talk about medications. Prior to this meeting, the group had been discussing the varied problems they each experienced with their medications and how they each coped with the difficulties initiated by different medications and various combinations of prescriptive drugs. These discussions prompted them to invite the pharmacist to offer her expertise on these issues. At a certain point in the meeting, the topic of home remedies emerged.

USER A	I went back to the old days, you know? Because the doctor told me to use an anti-inflammatory cream to treat an irritation, right?
PHARMACIST	Yes.
USER A	It was really painful. A very sharp pain. The cream burned my whole heel! The skin was coming off! You should have seen it! Well, then I stopped using that cream. And do you know what I did? My mother used to use this remedy. She made an alcohol solution out of grain… no… it was grain alcohol with cloves and pepper. The one … the whole clove, you know?
USER B	And how about your skin? Didn't this mixture irritate it?
USER A	No. Not this remedy.

The pharmacist, who was facilitating the meeting, adopted a non-judgmental stance within the group, letting the patient talk about how she managed the situation. With just one word, "Yes," she was responsive to A's story and encouraged her to continue with her description of her mother's commonsense treatment. The pharmacist's listening position seemed

to give room for other stories to emerge. Group members started to offer their own stories about home-made remedies. They felt free to talk about healthcare treatments that are very much part of their local culture yet are alien to the culture of modern medicine.

USER A	Listen, after that (taking the prescribed medication), my knee started to hurt.
USER B	What? (expression of astonishment)
USER A	I took a book that I have at home. Avocado with grain alcohol. I put the prescription the doctor had given me aside and then started to use this home remedy on my knee. It got better! Now, I can't take the medicine. I can't take the anti-inflammatory medications. I can't put any of this on my knee. That's it!
USER C	Is it the one with avocado?
PHARMACIST	The alcohol... the alcohol. It is... in fact.... it is going to help in the healing process.
USER C	The avocado that you cut, was it ripe? I have done this as well.
USER A	No. You have to put the avocado in the sun and take the brown skin off. Then you cut it all and put it inside a glass.
PHARMACIST	Some people use the avocado's seed. They put it in alcohol and leave it there until it softens. Then they use the solution – the alcohol with residue from the avocado seed – on the problem area.
USER D	Really?
USER A	Wow!! It really gets better…
USER C	We have to cut it when it is green like that, when you just pick it from the tree.
PHARMACIST	(To the pharmacology student present) Will you remember to do some research about the avocado seed to find out how it can be used to treat rheumatism?
USER C	Listen. Do you know about a weed that grows around the sidewalk that is good to use for high blood pressure? I have a book that talks about this. It is written by a nurse and she talks about this weed.

Here, we see the pharmacist adopting an open stance. She opens the conversation to all participants, allowing more interaction among the group and allowing them to bring and share stories about how they have treated their own health problems. They feel free – even in the presence of a pharmacist – to exchange stories of their own home remedies and the success they have had using them. By allowing the group to share their knowledge, the pharmacist does not need to abandon her own scientific knowledge. As a form of collaboration, she explains the healing process of alcohol to the group and asks her student assistant to conduct further research into the healing powers of the avocado seed.

PHARMACIST	Listen, the next time I come here, do you know what we can discuss? Let's talk about home-made medicine. I think that would be interesting.
USER A	Nice!
RESEARCHER	So, is it a deal?
PHARMACIST	Home-made medicine!!!

In this short excerpt, we note that the pharmacist, in her invitation to extend the group's conversation in another meeting, was responsive to the contributions of the participants. She was illustrating her curiosity for the members' local ways of making sense of their own healthcare. As the expert or scientist, the pharmacist was open to the comments of the users. By making space she legitimized the discussion of the participants' non-traditional health treatments. Thus, the possibility for alternative ways of talking (i.e., alternative discourses) as well as the possibility for future collaborations were crafted. Users became curious about each other's remedies and apparently comfortable sharing their own knowledge with professionals.

As a researcher, Camargo-Borges worked with the hypertension group and the health professionals who visited the group to explore how the Family Healthcare Program could best meet the needs of the community. This action research process expanded the ways in which both health professionals and health service users participated in and understood the potential of organized health groups. It exploring possibilities together and embracing topics well beyond hypertension, health and health services in this specific community were re-defined. This is precisely what I am referring to when I talk about expanding discursive potential; community members (researchers and researcher participants) generate new ways of working. In the present case, a specific health issue, hypertension, gave way to social activities among professionals and

health service users that improved the quality of care, provided resources for healthy living, and transformed local understandings and expectations of the health service.

Educational Reform

In another illustration of action research, we can also see that the relational ethic of discursive potential at play. In this case, an academic department of a private high school was charged by the headmaster (along with all academic departments) to evaluate and revise their curriculum. The Dean of Faculty and the Department Chair both viewed this mandatory curricular reform as an opportunity to intervene in the long-standing conflict within the department. Somewhere in the past – over twenty years earlier – two teachers had such strongly held differences that their conflict continued to the present day (no one can quite remember what the original point of difference was for the two). Since their initial conflict emerged, each of the two warring teachers actively recruited other department teachers into supporting positions for his/her "side" of the battle. At the time the mandatory curricular reform was announced, the Dean and Chair decided that this might be an opening possibility for conflict resolution. Under the guise of curricular reform, perhaps the entire department could put their long-standing conflict to rest. I was the researcher/consultant hired to design and facilitate this "curricular reform" that was actually functioning as conflict mediation (McNamee, 2004).

The Chair had announced to the teachers that they would be required to participate in a three-day retreat in the fall. The purpose of this retreat was to evaluate their program and working style. The retreat began on Sunday afternoon and ended with lunch on Tuesday. The majority of the teachers resented the idea of the retreat. Many were willing to go but were also ready to resent being forced into this activity if it turned out to be another situation where a lot of good conversation transpired with no subsequent action.

I was introduced to the teachers at the first meeting of the academic year. During this introduction, I explained that my intention was not to evaluate their program and working style from *my* perspective but rather to invite them into a conversation with me about how best to evaluate their program and their working style as a group. I described my interest in working from discussions of what they value in their program and in their collegial relationships as opposed to engaging in detailed explorations of what was not working or what they did not like. I explained that I understood there already was a good deal of both open and private discussion

about problems and their causes. Additionally, I explained that while those sorts of conversations can be useful and often help to clarify and thereby improve a program, this had not been the case for this department, by their own admission. Therefore, my attempt would be to bracket discussions of problems and blame and instead place the spotlight on how to build on the curricular and collegial *strengths* that already were acknowledged within the program. Further, I explained that my intention was not to find a way to make them all get along with each other. Rather, my hope was that a byproduct of our collaborative curriculum evaluation would be a respect for differences that would promote new ways of coordinating their work activities together that might be more generative and harmonious. I was interested in what might be *useful* to them, not what was *right*. Had a chosen to focus on what was "right," I would be saddled with identifying whose notion of "right" would count as "right" for all.

In addition, I shared my hope that the department would begin to develop more collaborative, respectful working relations by virtue of their participation in the joint creation of the curriculum evaluation. I invited each member of the department to contact me with any further questions, concerns, or suggestions and asked if I could meet one-on-one with each of them. Prior to these one-on-one meetings, I sent each person a list of questions upon which to reflect in preparation for our discussion. These questions were designed to generate reflection *prior* to the interviews:

1. How would you characterize yourself as a member of this department? Can you describe your relationship to the department and to the School? If you can think of a story that conveys who you are in these relationships, that would be useful to me in understanding you and your relationships with the group.
2. Have you heard or experienced conversations within the School – at any level – related to how your department operates and envisions itself that have been especially constructive? What do you think made these conversations constructive? Additionally, what does the usual conversation within the department (about *how* to be a department) focus on? What topics, questions, or information are usually avoided or excluded, which are useful, etc.?
3. As you think about the upcoming retreat, what could happen there that would lead you to feel that your participation was worthwhile and what could happen afterwards that would make you happy to have been part of the group discussion?

What do you most care that I keep in mind during the retreat? From your perspective, what topics are most important for discussion during the retreat (to make it successful)?

4. What might be set in place to enable you to speak as fully as you wish at the retreat? Can you suggest any guidelines for communicating that represent your own commitments to speak and listen in ways that support the general purpose of the retreat?

5. What do you want your colleagues to understand about who you are and what you most care about around the issue of department identity and practice? What questions do you hope that others might ask you? What do you really want to understand about your departmental colleagues and their concerns? What might you ask others in order to get some clarity about these things?

6. Do you have any further questions or comments for me?

As you can see, my questions were designed to invite participants to consider their own and others' multiple voices and multiple understandings. During the interviews, I did not methodically go through this list of questions. Instead, I began each interview by asking each person to tell me what he or she thought I most needed to know about the Department, the curriculum, and the working relationships of members. I asked each member to describe the department at its best and to comment on the values, strengths, and talents each one, personally, offered to the department. I also asked them to imagine what their colleagues might identify as the values, strengths and talents the interviewee contributed to the program.

As might be expected, my interviews did not omit discussion of departmental or personal problems. Many of the teachers seemed to view their interviews with me as a chance to air their side of the story. In my own experience, prohibiting the very issues that people want to discuss is oppressive and therefore monologic. Sampson (1993) describes monologism as a particular way of engaging with others where one sees the other as separate and in the service of oneself. Dialogism, on the other hand, celebrates the coordination of all participants in the conversation and recognizes the mutual dependence participants have on each other to construct the worlds in which they live. I find that when people feel they have had a chance to tell their story *and* it has been heard, they are very willing to experiment with talking in a different way. Thus, when teachers wanted to talk about problems with me, I did not try to redirect the conversation.

Given the history of this group, of their difficult interpersonal relationships, and of the fact that I had been hired by the Chair of the department (who was not outside of the fray of hostile histories), I was fascinated at the willingness of participants to offer detailed accounts of the relational politics within the department. In fact, in one interview I commented on how appreciative I was of the raw honesty and trust I experienced. The person I was interviewing at the time responded, "But you told us we should trust you!" As the outsider, this was a very confirming moment and I wonder how much I can credit the trustworthiness I embodied with this group to the time-consuming task of meeting each teacher one-on-one. By beginning each interview with my vow to confidentiality and by giving my time to get to know each one personally, I was able to listen to the problems, acknowledge that they had been heard, and engage in a discussion of strengths, values, and high points.

The strengths, values and high points remained the focus of my work with the department. I began by sharing with the teachers all the overlapping themes that emerged from my one-on-one interviews. These themes included: (1) the department's focus on history and tradition vs. change, (2) evaluation of each other and of students, (3) commitment to a common but broad pedagogical frame vs. teacher's autonomy and independence in the classroom, (4) the decision making process and the need for and meaning of agreement and consensus, (5) what it means to be a good colleague, (6) the unifying power of discussing intellectual passions, and (7) the need for ritualistic celebration of each other's achievements.

Immediately before the retreat, I asked the teachers to reflect on additional issues in order to prepare them for work on evaluating their current curriculum and working style. These issues, beyond preparing them to engage in the evaluation that would transpire at the retreat, were designed to orient the group toward a collaborative mode of work. The teachers were asked to think about and be ready to share their personal statement of teaching. To assist them in this task, they were given the following questions: (1) How did you come into the profession of teaching? What captured your imagination about this life choice? (2) What drew you to the idea of working with students? (3) What ideas did you have about working with colleagues? (4) What attracted you to this particular school? (5) How would you describe your overall teaching objectives and goals? and (6) Provide an anecdote or story that will capture for the group your teaching methods.

These questions were designed to spark stories of high points. However, the high points were not about the department or school as a whole but were about each member's own passion for teaching. The assumption was made that sharing stories of one's own love and excitement about teaching could serve as an initiation into a different and transformative conversation among colleagues. This is contrasted to a more standard inquiry into one's teaching philosophy that would generally yield a set of abstract principles. These stories were shared at the opening of the retreat.

Further, in keeping with the collaborative nature of action research, the design of the retreat was generated in collaboration with the Department's Self Study Subcommittee. This subcommittee was appointed as part of the School-wide curriculum assessment procedure. Each department had their own working subcommittee focused on the details of their own departments. These subcommittees would meet together periodically to discuss the broader issues of the School-wide curriculum. The Department's subcommittee had been meeting for several months and had gathered numerous documents to review in assessing and re-designing their curriculum. I offered to coordinate with the Self Study Subcommittee since they were already engaged in the process of evaluating the departmental curriculum. Together, we collaborated in designing the retreat agenda in such a way that the materials and issues generated by the Self Study Subcommittee were integrated with the issues given voice by the teachers in my interviews.[1]

By the end of the retreat, the teachers had come to a collective understanding of their curriculum and a vision of where they should be heading. This is not to suggest that there was absolute agreement about the curriculum nor about how to work together as a group. However, the themes that had emerged in my one-on-one interviews (identified above) echoed throughout the retreat discussions and seemed to open the possibility for new conversations and new ways of constructing a strong curriculum.

As for evaluating the working relationships among the teachers, the evaluation process engaged them in not only new conversations (e.g., conversations about what they value, what works, and what they see as strengths in each other and their curriculum) but also in new *ways* to be in conversation with each other. Each person was invited into each other's passion and joy

[1] It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail the entire research process. For details of this action research project, please see McNamee (2004).

for teaching. Each was given the opportunity to recognize similarities between self and other. Each was afforded the chance to see the other in a frame that differed dramatically from the distrusting and disrespectful frame of everyday departmental activities.

The results of this very different conversation were identified in follow-up conversations with the teachers. They reported that their perceived differences were actually smaller than they imagined. They also reported that the process of examining their curriculum in the manner we did allowed them the opportunity to engage with each other in ways that were new and useful. Rather than making negative judgmental assessments of their curriculum or their working style (or of each other!), they engaged in conversations that were effectively *different*. They were taking stock of what worked, what they valued, what their strengths were.

After providing a report to the Dean of Faculty, the Department Chair, and each teacher, I met with the Dean and Chair to discuss their responses to the summary of the retreat. This discussion began a dialogue concerning the ways in which the school's administration could assist the department in making the desired changes. Follow up conversations with the Department Chair and the teachers indicated that they had developed new procedures for teacher evaluation and were in the process of trying out these procedures. They reported that the annual teacher evaluation had taken on an exciting new tenor because of the conversations they had, the procedures with which they were experimenting, and the feeling that this process was on-going and flexible. As part of the process of peer evaluation and also of curriculum development, the teacher-initiated classroom observation and feedback sessions. In discussing feedback from teachers, they report a more collegial sense of the annual review process.

The simple act of openly discussing the review procedures changed the way in which both senior and junior teachers approached evaluative reviews. They reported on-going conversations to alter the actual method of review, yet the methods were maintained but the experience was reported as different. These discussions also opened generative cross talk concerning pedagogical issues such as course content, course sequencing, and teaching styles, thereby assisting in the further development of the "ideal" curriculum. The department also reported that they had a well-functioning agenda committee that reviewed all issues within the department's operation and prioritized discussions and actions among the teachers. The combination of these three actions (all agreed upon at the close of the retreat) assisted the department in realizing one of their collectively negotiated goals: direct communication with

each other concerning professional and personal concerns. It seems that the *different* conversations – conversations that were initiated with personal stories and developed into dialogue about strengths, values, and ideals – helped to create different ways of interacting among the teachers. While they assessed their working relationships and style of working in negative terms prior to this action research project, they emerged from it with a very different sense of who they were as a group and how they worked together. In effect, they reported respecting disagreements on issues and becoming curious rather than judgmental about them.

Closing comments: Action Research as Ethical Practice

In the two illustrations offered here, we see how action research, by privileging collaboration and social change over the traditional research priority of researcher expertise and discoveries about the world, offers a relational ethic of discursive potential. Stigmatized, solidified, and intractable beliefs and values give way to an opportunity to coordinate differences and, in so doing, generate useful ways to transform communities, groups, and organizations. This is ethical action, relationally ethical research that is sensitive to context, open to difference, and attuned to finding ways for communities to "go on together" (Wittgenstein, 1953).

The ethic of discursive potential underscores the humanizing aspect of action research. In giving voice to multiple understandings, action research unites participants in negotiating their futures together. It acknowledges the ways in which all social action rests within a matrix of relationships with multiple actors, multiple contexts, and multiple social discourses. With this relationally sensitive ethic of discursive potential, action research contributes to our understanding of our own participation in creating our social worlds. This understanding, in turn, assists us in working together to craft more livable futures while broadening our understanding of research.

A further point is worth stating. Within the world of traditional research, the action research described in this chapter might appear to be a process of organizational consultation rather than research. This hard distinction between research and consultation is only viable if we view research as a rigorous process of discovering reality as opposed to viewing research as an embodied cultural practice that is situated in history and local circumstances. Research, like everything in the social world, is a relational process. Research requires negotiation and coordination concerning how we name, identify, and understand the social world. Action

research embraces this emphasis and understands research as a process of socially constructing our worlds. In so doing, action research embodies the relational ethic of discursive potential; it opens a space where researcher and participants can expand their ways of talking and acting and, thereby, action research can be seen as a process of social transformation.

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