

"In the Pursuit of Change and Understanding"

Bob Dick in Conversation With Bob Williams

Abstract: As Bob WILLIAMS interviews Bob DICK by email, he asks about important events and people in Bob DICK's life and the influence they have had. Bob DICK identifies people, challenge and participation as themes. From them he draws lessons about action research, his most used research methodology. Bob DICK identifies teachers, colleagues and mentors who have acted as role models for him and who have helped to increase his confidence in himself, his willingness to work at the boundaries of his knowledge, and his use of participative methods. He reports that it is when he is working at the margins of his skills and experience that his learning and productivity are often greatest. He comments on the reasons for his commitment to participative approaches to research. Together Bob WILLIAMS and Bob DICK discuss the direction of current action research and the role of the Internet. They reach two key conclusions about the important features of action research. One is that relationships are central to the action aspects of action research. Good relationships allow people to feel involved in the research and develop a sense of ownership. The other conclusion is that the research aspect of action research is driven by reflection and the key to reflection is exploring difference. Disagreements and disconfirming evidence most effectively point to emerging theory and deeper understanding. Other conclusions they reach are about the importance of the early stages of research, the need for flexibility and responsiveness to the research situation, and the desirability of treating action research as both science and performing art.

Key words: *action research, reflection, Internet, learning, relationships, disconfirming evidence*

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About the Interview

Bob WILLIAMS lives in Wellington, New Zealand. Bob DICK's home is in Brisbane, Australia. Both have been traveling a lot recently. This interview was therefore conducted by email. The conversation unfolded almost exactly as it is written below, with Bob WILLIAMS asking an initial series of questions about the key people in Bob DICK's career, and what he learned from them. The whole interview attempted to model reflective practice—seeking exceptions to generalisations, identifying themes and drawing lessons learned. [1]

About Bob Dick

In the past Bob DICK has been shop assistant, electrician, draftsman, recruitment officer, and psychologist. For the past 30 years he has been academic, publisher, consultant, facilitator, and of course person. His consultancy and facilitation primarily help people learn action research, qualitative evaluation, change management, and the communication and facilitation skills which are a foundation for these. In this work he uses highly participative methods to help others to improve their practice while also trying to improve his own. When he isn't doing these things he thinks about them. He maintains one of the world's premier action research web sites at Southern Cross University (<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/qcm/ar/arhome.html>). He lives in the leafy western suburbs of Brisbane, in sub-tropical Australia, with his partner of 30 years, Camilla. He may be contacted at bdick@scu.edu.au. [2]

1. Key Events

WILLIAMS: You've been involved in the action research field one way or another for at least three decades. Can you select one or two events from each of those three decades that were significant in your development as an action research theorist and practitioner? What was significant about these events to you then and what is their significance to you now? [3]

DICK: I'd like to go back a little further than you suggest. I was fortunate that some of the role models in my earlier life had a talent for encouraging and developing others. I owe them a lot. [4]

1.1 More than three decades ago ...

DICK: The first of them that I'll mention was Murray HINES. Murray was my primary school teacher when I was in grades 5 and 6. He used to involve his class of pre-teens in helping to make decisions. One of his talents was creating tasks which allowed everyone in the class to contribute. For me this was at an influential age for learning the benefits of classroom democracy. I was later to have a chance to pass on what I had learned from Murray to another generation. [5]

Another role model was Rhoda FELGATE. She was the director of an amateur theatre company where I spent many of my free hours in the very late 1950s and early 1960s. On several occasions she encouraged me to take on responsibilities such as stage management and stage production. I thought they were beyond my talent and experience. [6]

Occasionally I was right. I didn't have the skills. When it didn't work as well as it might she was there to provide support. She helped me learn from the experience. She helped me plan for how I would put that learning into practice. [7]

One of her sayings was "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly". I should point out that she had high expectations of herself and others. It was her way of saying something important. Do what is worth doing. Give it your best. If you do so, that's all anyone can ask of you. That's all you can reasonably ask of yourself. [8]

The importance of both of these people was threefold. By having faith in me they helped me to develop faith in myself. That's a useful trait in a profession where your next step may take you out of your depth. By focussing my attention on experience in a non-judgmental way they helped me develop a commitment to my own development. A commitment to life-long learning is also valuable in this trade. They acted as role models that I now try to emulate in my action research and change work. [9]

1.2 Three decades ago ...

DICK: Just over three decades ago I joined the staff of the University of Queensland. There I was again fortunate to have exemplary role models. [10]

John DAMM was my immediate colleague. My first appointment was for six months as a temporary arrangement on secondment from my usual work. I stood in for John while he went on study leave. I expected him to tell me in detail how to run his courses while he was away. Instead he encouraged me to decide how I wished to run them. He offered whatever help I needed. This freed me to bring participative methods into the classroom. It was also through John that I came to know Fred EMERY. I think he had the most penetrating mind of anyone I've known. His ideas too have influenced my practice. In particular he almost always strove to render ideas into very simple and accessible language. He was also egalitarian in his approach. [11]

A colleague in a neighbouring department was Hollis PETER. Hollis was professor of management. He was another of those people who encouraged and developed the people he worked with. Well before I thought I was ready for it he invited me to join the staff in a 10-day residential program he offered each year. The first five days of each program consisted of a "T-group". In the second five days we addressed techniques for organisation development. [12]

A T-group was an unstructured group where the only allowable topics were what were present in the room and the moment: "here and now". That meant "relationships". At first I was a participant in these groups and later a facilitator. In both roles I learned to value relationships. I learned how to build and maintain them. It didn't always come easily: by nature I'm reticent and retiring. With only a little exaggeration I can say that I'm the most introverted person I know. [13]

Choosing to do academic and consulting work seemed a puzzling choice at the time. Looking back, it was a choice that helped me develop some of the skills and understanding which I most lacked. My communication and facilitation skills improved. I believe these are foundation skills for action research. The T-groups provided experience which, in retrospect, was essential to the work I now do. [14]

Another role model was Chris ARGYRIS. We haven't ever met. I *have* read almost every book he has written. In 1975 John McCALLUM, a member of my fourth year class, thrust *Theory in practice* (ARGYRIS & SCHÖN 1974) at me with a suggestion that I read it. I did. It provided answers to some issues I was struggling with as I wrote some material on communication. *Theory in practice* has probably had more influence on the way I work and the way I conceptualise it than any other single book. And I read widely. [15]

1.3 Two decades ago ...

DICK: As I mentioned above, my classroom experience as an academic goes back three decades. From the first I tried to adopt participative methods. However, it was in the period in the late 1980s that I'd like to describe. That was when I began to experience the real effects of classroom democracy. [16]

I was responsible for a fourth year class in "social consultancy". We met as a class for 8 hours a week for two semesters. That's about 200 hours, long enough to develop a sense of community. It was in that setting that I learned most about using my communication and facilitation skills to involve others. [17]

At the beginning of each year the class members and I would plan the course: first the content, then the process, and then the responsibilities. At first I was surprised how difficult it was to get democracy to work, and how effective it was when it *did* work. That happened when people took the risk to experience each other as people, not as "students" or "lecturers" or whatever. People, ultimately, are people. Sometimes they forget that important truth. [18]

I was able to take the skills and processes from the classroom and use them in community and organisational change work. I learned that what worked in one setting often didn't immediately work elsewhere. However it could usually be fine-tuned until it did. Classroom and workshop and organization and community each provided learning which benefited all four. [19]

To be honest, my natural talents incline more towards theory than practice. In the classroom I learned that practice was most effective when I understood what I was doing. Theory was most useful when it was closely allied to practice. Eventually the distinction between them ceased to be important. I enjoy thinking before the event about what will work. I enjoy thinking later about what did or didn't work. My theory and practice improved. I learned the virtue of regular and systematic and critical reflection both for myself and for the classes I facilitated. [20]

From time to time I did work with difficult groups, especially in community and organisational work. Sometimes the events happened so rapidly that there wasn't time to work out what to do before I did it. I learned that I do some very creative facilitating and theorising when I'm desperate. That was a valuable experience indeed. It now allows me to venture nearer to the margins of my expertise than I otherwise might. In some very recent work I have been able to work effectively under very difficult conditions with angry and uncooperative people. [21]

It was about this time that I met Tim DALMAU. He was another important influence. We co-authored some books on cultural change. In the course of doing so it became apparent that it was our seeming disagreements which often opened a door to deeper understanding. [22]

Tim and I also did some cultural change work together. Again, that seemed almost designed to further my personal and professional development. By nature I'm rational and sceptical, which I sometimes blame on a strict Presbyterian upbringing. That attitude was further honed in engineering studies (not completed) and two completed degrees in experimental psychology. Rationality and scepticism are an inadequate basis for cultural change work, I found. Culture is best approached indirectly through such mediums as metaphor and story. I came to value story. That was superb experience for an over-rational sceptic. (I haven't abandoned the rationality and scepticism. I've complemented them with some different skills and mindsets.) [23]

1.4 The most recent decade ...

DICK: Recent years have been characterised by experience directly related to action research. Earlier, I viewed it as a family of processes that helped me to do my work more effectively. In addition, now to some extent by accident, I've become an action research methodologist. [24]

It began with Alan DAVIES, then a professor at Southern Cross University and formerly a colleague of Fred EMERY, mentioned earlier. Alan invited me to join him in supervising some off-shore PhDs in Singapore for the University of South Australia. This we did. We visited Singapore three times a year. To provide sufficient support for the candidates between our visits we organised them into action learning groups. They met monthly. They helped each other, critiqued each others' work, and provided a kind word or an offer of help when it most mattered. [25]

Action learning wasn't new to me. The Australian public service had offered a project-based management development program in Queensland many years earlier. I facilitated it for several years. It was with the Singaporeans, though, that I learned just how effective action learning could be. These were senior managers, working long hours and often travelling overseas. With each others' support they finished their PhDs in fewer years than most full time candidates in Australia do. In helping others to learn action research I substantially improved my own conscious understanding of it. [26]

Since then Alan and I have fine-tuned our approach and provided similar work for Southern Cross University. More recently Stewart HASE and I have continued it. I wanted to provide extra resources for the candidates. While I was still at the University of Queensland I began to set up an action research site. Later, offered a part-time position at Southern Cross, I transferred the web site to its present location at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>. [27]

The site includes an on line action research journal, *Action research international*. Through that I met (virtually, at least) many of the people in the wider action research community. The journal features an open review system: editors, subscribers and authors discuss the submitted papers publicly on line. It is a good venue for getting to know different aspects of people than from their more formal writing. [28]

Since the beginning of 2003 I've been doing only occasional casual academic classroom work. I miss the classes. As compensation I now have the opportunity to take on larger and longer term consultancy projects. I'm sure that they, and the people I meet through them, will offer further opportunities to improve my understanding and skills. [29]

2. Key Themes

WILLIAMS: Standing back and squinting your eyes a little, what would you say are the three major themes that emerge from your story? [30]

2.1 First theme ... people

DICK: The people who have most influenced me have had a number of characteristics in common:

- they encouraged me to reach beyond what I thought I was capable of doing
- they valued the trying more than the success
- they seemed to know when I needed support
- they treated me as a colleague, not as a subordinate or an apprentice or something like that. [31]

WILLIAMS: What would be an exception to this generalisation? [32]

DICK: Often enough I have worked with colleagues who I don't regard as mentors and haven't tried to emulate. However, there were often valuable insights to be gained from working with them. For instance I learned to integrate my approach with theirs. In doing so I discovered ways of modifying my approach while achieving the desired outcomes and observing my values. I also learned that their way, though different to mine, worked as well for them as mine did for me. [33]

WILLIAMS: What have you have learned from the fact that these opposing conditions can be both "true" for you; what meanings do you draw from this? [34]

DICK: From this I conclude (though it's not a new conclusion for me) that there are many ways of describing the world. There are many ways of achieving good outcomes. What works well for one person doesn't necessarily work for someone else. [35]

2.2 Second theme ... working at the margins

DICK: It is often when I'm working at or near the margins of my experience that I learn the most. That's also often when I do some of my more creative work. This happens, for instance, when I'm working with people who disagree with me or have a very different approach. It also happens when approaches I've used effectively in the past unexpectedly don't work—when something happens to disconfirm the assumptions I'm working from. [36]

WILLIAMS: Again, what would be an exception to this generalisation? [37]

DICK: A current assignment is testing me severely. On the face of it there isn't a *great* challenge in it. I'm working in a program with participants who don't tell me when they are dissatisfied. When I challenge them about their lack of enthusiasm they fob me off by denying it. I haven't yet been able to work out what I can do to engage them. It seems to me that I have the skills and experience and concepts to do what I'm being asked to do. In this situation that doesn't seem to be enough. [38]

WILLIAMS: What do you draw from this? [39]

DICK: I'm unsure what to conclude. Perhaps I am working at the margins of my ability and don't have the understanding to recognise it. Perhaps in seeking to work mostly with enthusiasts in the past I've lost some of the ability to work with non-enthusiasts. As I say that, though, I recollect recent exercises where I was chosen because I mostly didn't become defensive in the face of opposition and resistance. [40]

Perhaps the issue is that I don't yet understand their motivations. Therefore I have difficulty knowing how to engage them. Perhaps working at the margins of my skill and experience is fine, but at the margins of my understanding I experience difficulty. I will reflect on this. [41]

2.3 Third theme ... participation

DICK: I've continually tried to enhance my ability to involve people in full participation in the research that I do. To some extent I am emulating my mentors in doing this. I think that shows in my answers to your first round of questions. It's also because I have a high need for autonomy and try to extend the same autonomy to those I work with. [42]

It's because I've been linked in to varied and supportive networks of practitioner-scholars, and still am, that this occurs. Many of the people in these networks both learn from the past and encourage ongoing experimentation. Because much of their and my learning comes from experience our practice tends to be ahead of our conscious understanding. [43]

WILLIAMS: Exceptions, and *learnings*? [44]

DICK: There have been times enough when I haven't been able to extend autonomy to others because I didn't have it to extend. For instance at university I would much have preferred to give participants in classes the choice of how they would be assessed. However, the university had requirements which had to be met. [45]

In the consultancy mentioned above there is a tight contract and set "mileposts". Sometimes these require me to ignore my preferences and work within boundaries that I wouldn't have voluntarily chosen. [46]

I conclude (and again this is not a new insight) that sometimes it is necessary to work within "givens". Provided I know what the givens are I can work satisfactorily and extend enough autonomy to those I'm working with. The contract I try to negotiate with clients is one where there is "freedom within limits that are clear and renegotiable, high aspirations, and good support". That's borrowed from Stanley COOPERSMITH (1967). [47]

3. Lessons

WILLIAMS: Overall what lessons for qualitative research can be drawn from these learnings? [48]

DICK: I'll answer for action research rather than for qualitative research. Apart from purely archival research, my own research is almost always in the context of change. As I do research I almost always work as a change agent or a facilitator of change agents. I don't claim that the lessons I draw can be applied to all qualitative research. Other researchers will draw their own conclusions for their own research practice. [49]

3.1 Lesson one—the importance of exceptions

DICK: My first conclusion is that there are always exceptions. Reality is too complex to be captured by theory. I'm reminded of the general semantics principle that "the map is not the territory"—that a theory is distinct from the reality it purports to represent. The theories we draw from our data deserve to be treated with some scepticism. Theories are correct to the extent that the current situation falls within their boundary of application. [50]

Different theories, then, do not necessarily compete to decide which best proclaims the "truth". I prefer to think of them as different windows through which reality may be dimly viewed. More windows allow richer understanding. It is to be expected that different practitioners will achieve good results in different ways. Sometimes those different ways may even seem incompatible or mutually exclusive. It is to be expected that different aspects of a situation may assume importance at different times. A theory which worked yesterday may fail today. [51]

3.2 Lesson two—recipes are not enough

DICK: A second and third conclusion follow from this. The second is that "recipes" for research are not enough. Each situation is different. The process of research is different from the recipes which describe it. Sometimes the difference is enough to require past approaches to be abandoned for the moment so that something new can be tried. Random trial and error is a better bet than the use of a method or methodology which clearly isn't working. [52]

3.3 Lesson three—research is a science and a performing art

DICK: Third, research, especially field research, is both science and performing art. As an action researcher one does one's best in the moment and learns from what happens. One of my guiding models for action research is a cycle in which fuzzy questions asked using fuzzy methods yield fuzzy answers. Those answers allow slightly less fuzzy questions and methods to be used in the following cycle. Understanding develops gradually. In both research and change it is necessary to pay attention to the process that is occurring. [53]

I've been talking so far as if research is an individual activity. In practice there are participants. In action research the intention, as far as possible, is to involve them as equal partners in the research process and the research outcomes. I can use my own mentors and colleagues as role models for the ways in which I relate to participants. [54]

3.4 Lesson four—relationships are central

DICK: A fourth conclusion, therefore, is that relationships are a central and important feature of action research. The better the quality of relationship I can develop with them the more likely they are to join me as an equal in the research endeavour. As a colleague of mine has said to me, there are no bad outcomes. There are only learning opportunities. I can apply this to my own conduct. I can extend a similar philosophy to those I work with. [55]

3.5 Lesson five—early stages are important

DICK: It follows from this, perhaps as a fifth conclusion, that the early stages of a research study are important. This is when the nature of the relationships are negotiated and contracted. How I present myself in these early stages and how I engage with others may well influence profoundly our later relationship. [56]

3.6 Overall lessons

Looking back over what I've written I'd like to draw two more general conclusions. One is that relationships are fundamental. How I relate to others who are involved in the research influences

how honest we can be with one another. It helps to determine how open we can be to learning from our individual and especially collective experience. [57]

The other is that it is difference and disagreement and disconfirmation which drive research. While everything works as expected my colleagues and I are learning little. The surprises, the unexpected occurrences, the "disasters" ... when we are open to them offer us the most opportunity to learn from our experience. [58]

4. Action Research Can Be Surprisingly Hard Work

WILLIAMS: I've always been suspicious of those who promote action research as the always most empowering, delightful and wonderful thing. That's not my experience. Often it is hard, distressing and disappointing. Actually I often get angry at those who promote action research as something natural and easy, because it sets up unreal expectations for those who are new to action research. I've seen a lot of people just give up and go back to the "old" ways because their action research endeavour was nowhere near as easy or rewarding and universally accepted as the books said. [59]

DICK: I agree with you that field research is difficult. People often adopt it expecting it to be an easier option compared to other (especially quantitative) research. They are almost inevitably disappointed. Most good research is difficult, though, I suspect. [60]

At the same time I think that action research *does* build on natural practices. Its basic cycle consists of planning, action and review. To some extent in our everyday lives we all plan before we act. To some extent we review what happens after we act. Compared to ordinary living, in action research the planning and review is more systematic and regular and critical. For those who research their own practice without involving others this is within the reach of most researchers. [61]

It is when others are engaged as participants and co-researchers in the research that further skills are required. Without at least some communication and facilitation skills the work can become very difficult. [62]

WILLIAMS: Let me follow up on your "natural practices" comment. [63]

One of the reactions I get when describing action research to people is "Oh I do that already". So when the difficulty of action research hits people they often get very confused and sometimes angry. Given that they can't blame the process (because they have this notion of already doing it) I've found they blame themselves or someone else. [64]

So I went in search of what the "difficult" bit really is. Eventually I concluded that it lies in the concept of "reflection". The analytical demands of "reflection" are quite different from most people's experience, and as ARGYRIS and SCHÖN noted the response can be defensive rather than insightful. [65]

If my experience is widespread (and asking around I think it might be fairly common), then this clearly is a barrier to the wider adoption of action research practice. [66]

Have you noticed the same pattern, that is, the initial perception of action research as self-evident followed by some frustration, often located in the reflection process? [67]

DICK: I agree on both counts. On first hearing about action research, people *have* frequently said to me too that they are doing it already. When we have discussed further what they do, it is reflection that they omit. If present, it is meagre, unsystematic, and above all uncritical. [68]

I too have been interested in exploring why this is. Tentatively, I attribute it to two factors. [69]

One is that it does not seem to be natural to search out *disconfirmation*. As a species we seem to look for confirming evidence. In complex situations we can almost always find some. This is a

pity. As I've said, I believe that more often than not it is disconfirmation and disagreement which drive good research processes and new insights. [70]

The other factor is that, having achieved enough of the outcomes they wanted, they lose interest in exploring the situation further. They move on to the next action. The actions provide closure. I've found this to be particularly true of people who are very action oriented. As you would expect, many such people tend to find action research more congenial than other forms of research. [71]

WILLIAMS: How have you handled these situations? [72]

DICK: Encouraging people to reflect usually doesn't seem to work. Keeping a journal is helpful for some people. But many find it a chore and don't keep it up. [73]

I've had better success by encouraging them to give more attention to the *planning* aspect of the action research cycle. I now encourage people to ask themselves six questions about the situation they immediately face before they act:

- 1a What do I think are the most salient features of the situation I face?
- 1b What leads me to think that these are the salient features?
- 2a If I'm correct about the situation, what do I think are the desirable outcomes in this situation?
- 2b Why do I think those outcomes are desirable?
- 3a If I'm correct about the situation and outcomes, what actions do I think will lead to those outcomes?
- 3b Why do I think those actions will deliver those outcomes in that situation? [74]

Or, more briefly:

- 1a What is the *situation*?
- 1b *Why* do I think so?
- 2a What *outcomes* are therefore desirable?
- 2b *Why* do I think so?
- 3a What *actions* are therefore required?
- 3b *Why* do I think so? [75]

After I had been using these for a while I noticed that the answers define Chris ARGYRIS's "theory of action": In situation S, if you intend consequence C, do A, given assumptions a(1) ... a(n). (This is from ARGYRIS & SCHÖN 1974, p.27.) It seems to me that that is precisely the sort of theory that is useful to practitioners. It is derived directly from action and leads easily to action. [76]

I think it has the effect of making tacit understanding explicit. Once explicit, the disconfirmation is more likely to be noticed. In short, most people seem to do better at reflection after the event if they give more attention to reflection before the event. [77]

5. What Helps and Hinders Action Research

WILLIAMS: That's a really useful tool you've developed, and I want to expand out from it a bit. [78]

So far you've commented that when it comes to action research in particular and perhaps other research in general

- there are always exceptions,
- "recipes" for research are not enough. Research, especially field research, is both science and performing art,
- relationships are fundamental,

- difference and disagreement and disconfirmation drive research, and
- the early stages of a research study are important. [79]

These are of course very interlinked. As we've discussed they also highlight what makes action research both hard and also rewarding. We've talked a bit about the challenges of "reflection" but there are also challenges here about the idea of what is and what is not "research". The first four of your conclusions do not describe how many people view "research", including those who commission research, those who undertake it and often those individuals within a community that are engaged in it. [80]

DICK: Again, I agree. [81]

5.1 What hinders

WILLIAMS: So what do you think are the major factors that hinder a wider acceptance of these features of action research? [82]

DICK: I'd like to make five points. [83]

The first point I would make is that my four conclusions would be regarded as counter-cultural in many arenas. Many researchers learn to judge their own research approach by criteria which fit that approach. Quantitative researchers therefore expect sophisticated measurement and analysis, the use of control groups, random allocation of participants to groups, and tightly pre-designed research protocols. Such criteria serve them well when they are judging other quantitative research. It fails them badly when they critique other approaches. To such people even superb action research can appear sloppy. [84]

It doesn't help that some poor action research has been done from time to time. People tend to judge their own research paradigm by its exemplars. They judge other paradigms by the actual cases. [85]

Second, curiosity-motivated research is still to some extent regarded with more approval than applied research. As a high-performing undergraduate I was expected to do pure research. It was assumed that applied research was somehow easier and not really worthy of bright people. I later found that this was mostly a mistaken view, though I believe it was genuinely held by those who espoused it. The conceptual challenges of much applied research exceeded those of the laboratory research I had been used to. [86]

Third, academics who are applied researchers often aren't on campus to present their point of view, even if they are inclined to do so. They tend to be marginalised. For whatever reason they don't spend as much time publishing their work. If you're looking for a high publication rate there are easier ways of getting it than through complex and applied research. [87]

In any event there aren't the same publication outlets for applied research. I think this is changing, but (in the fields where I work) it is the established journals which tend to be most prestigious. [88]

The fourth factor supports your contention about difficulty. If you are going to adopt the more participative versions of action research you need more than just research skills. Meagre communication and facilitation skills aren't enough. You have to be confident facilitating groups of many sizes. You need skills at managing differences of opinion and overt or covert conflict. It helps if you have a high tolerance for ambiguity. If you lack these skills it is too easy to get offside with participants or do poor research. [89]

Fifth, applied research tends, by its nature, to be multi-disciplinary. For the most part I don't think real issues conform to the disciplinary boundaries that universities and journals observe. Applied researchers have to be willing to step beyond the boundaries of their expertise more often than many other researchers do. [90]

5.2 What helps

WILLIAMS: The mere fact that action research is widespread means there must be some forces that work in its favour. What do you think they are? [91]

DICK: I've already mentioned that I think action research builds on natural processes. In addition the rewards for applied research are increasing. Governments and funding bodies increasingly expect that some of their dollars will be spent on real issues which require attention. [92]

I think it also helps that there can be substantial benefits for participants and those who commission research. For example, there is a growing tendency for local organisations to use action research's cousin, action learning, for professional development. Often the organisation is able to solve an organisational problem at the same time as they develop their people. [93]

I might mention that some of these issues have been canvassed in recent issues of the journal *Concepts and Transformation*, beginning with a paper by Davydd GREENWOOD (2002). It has been continued by several commentators into 2004. [94]

5.3 Helping the helps and hindering the hinderances

WILLIAMS: So what practical things can researchers (and research commissioners) do to increase the impact of the factors that "help" action research, and what practical things can they do to reduce the factors that hinder this approach? [95]

DICK: On a large scale, I don't know. The world moves in mysterious ways—at least it's mysterious to me. If I were to attempt something grand I'd be as likely to get it wrong as right, I suspect. It would be helpful I think if action researchers were less defensive about their own particular variety of research and engaged less in sectarian sniping. I don't know how to bring this about. [96]

There seems to be a modest trend upward in the understanding of what action research can offer. I'm thinking for instance of the communities and organisations asking for action research or action learning to be used in their projects. More theses and dissertations are done using action research. This is likely to create a generation of researchers who know how to do rigorous action research. I've seen job advertisements for community workers that say knowledge of action research would be an advantage. I think there has been an increase in monographs on action research in the "grey literature": the publications of Non-Governmental Organisations and other groups. [97]

I also find it encouraging that some of the newer professions have taken to action research with some enthusiasm. Nursing and information technology come to mind. There has been some well-argued and carefully-documented research in both. [98]

On a more modest scale I can help to advance action research by pursuing my own research with mindfulness and care. I can capitalise on the way action research mirrors (and builds on) normal behaviours, for instance by shunning jargon and talking in simple language. I can demonstrate in my own conduct the values that action research embodies: egalitarian, participative, action-oriented, rigorous. I can use action research to research and refine my own action research. To the extent that I do these I expect the use of action research to spread within my client and collegial networks. [99]

6. Core Values of Action Research Are Universal

WILLIAMS: You've just identified what you believe are the core values of action research: egalitarian, participative, action-oriented, rigorous. As you know there is a substantial debate about the so-called "Western" value base of most so-called "traditional" research. Yet the values you have just espoused seem universal, or at least not identified with specific national or ethnic cultures. I'd guess many, perhaps most, "Westerners" and "non-Westerners" would feel

comfortable with those values. What implications do you think this has for the adoption of action research in different national, professional and cultural traditions of inquiry? [100]

DICK: I can't comment from my own experience. My own use of action research is limited to Australia and to a small extent Singapore. I do know, however, that action research has been used in a variety of other cultures. My guess is that the values are universal. [101]

I suspect that the "Western" value base is the result of about 10,000 years of bureaucracy. That's long enough for us to develop a lot of beliefs and actions which support bureaucracy. [102]

My reading of the literature is that we're a small tribe species. Bureaucratic values, therefore, were a 10,000 year detour. Submerged beneath that, I suspect, are some hardwired values which are more nearly universal. [103]

7. Action Research and the Internet

WILLIAMS: Keeping this universal, internationalist thread of action research, let's talk about the Internet. I came across you initially via the Internet: You in Australia and me in New Zealand. In fact, you have been an active experimenter since the very early days with on-line approaches to action research; both teaching and undertaking action research. What are your reflections on the use of on-line approaches for carrying out action research? [104]

DICK: I think it's the Internet has been one of the triggers for the resurgence of action research in recent years. It's no longer necessary to build a critical mass of people in any one place. The Internet allows us to escape some of the limitations of space and time. [105]

Having said that, I think that face-to-face is easier. Given a choice between that and virtual research or learning I have no doubt of my preferences. Virtual action research is for when the more immediate face-to-face variety isn't available. [106]

8. It's All About Relationships and Disconfirmation

WILLIAMS: A final question Bob. If my computer ate the notes of this conversation, and I had to rebuild this conversation from scratch, what is the one thing you would like me to remember? [107]

DICK: One isn't enough. I'd prefer to offer two, both already mentioned. In defence I claim that they are closely interrelated. [108]

The first is about the quality of relationships. This can help or hinder just about everything else about action research unless it is done as a very solitary activity. I believe it is the basis for full engagement and participation. That in turn builds ownership. In turn that supports genuine and desirable change. [109]

The other is about difference and disagreement and disconfirmation. When there are no surprises I'm not learning much. It is when I react to disagreement and disconfirmation with curiosity rather than defensiveness that I learn most. When I facilitate others I try to encourage them to engage with disagreement in the same constructive way. That builds deeper understanding and better, more practical, more shared theory. [110]

I don't think it's accidental that those are the two dimensions of action research: change through participation and ownership; understanding through resolving disagreement and disconfirmation. Action research and its spiral process can fit those together into a seamless whole, integrating theory and practice. [111]

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