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***The Purpose of Mess in Action Research: building rigour through a messy turn.***

## ***The Purpose of Mess in Action Research: building rigour through a messy turn.***

### **Abstract**

*Mess and rigour might appear to be strange bedfellows. This paper argues that the purpose of mess is to facilitate a turn towards new constructions of knowing that lead to transformation in practice (an action turn). Engaging in action research, research that can disturb both individual and communally held notions of knowledge for practice, will be messy. Investigations into the 'messy area', the interface between the known and the nearly known, between knowledge-in-use and tacit knowledge as yet to be useful, reveal the 'messy area' as a vital element for seeing, disrupting, analysing, learning, knowing and changing. It is the place where long-held views shaped by professional knowledge, practical judgement, experience and intuition are seen through other lenses. It is here that reframing takes place and new knowing, that has both theoretical and practical significance, arises: a 'messy turn' takes place.*

**Key words:** *action research, mess, seeing, knowing, rigour, transformational*

### **Background**

Discussions abound about what characterises action research. Such discussions generally include notions about collaboration and participation, empowerment, acquisition of knowledge and social change. Kemmis and McTaggart (1990) describe action research as:

...a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p5).

The outline framework for action research enquiry is based upon a spiral of activity (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) that includes planning the research, carrying this out, observing outcomes and reflecting on outcomes to inform a new turn through the activity spiral. Against the backdrop of this description of action research, this paper is concerned with unpicking and illuminating how and where changes in understandings and practice occur within the research process. It considers both what mess in action research offers researchers in terms of opportunities for seeing and knowing and how mess relates to the contemporary debate about notions of rigour. It builds upon a paper written in 1998 (Cook, 1998) when I was increasingly aware of the importance of mess but was not, at the point, able to articulate its purpose.

## The issue of mess

As a novice researcher in the early 1990s I was influenced by a particular version of action research in the United Kingdom exemplified by the work of Stenhouse (1975). This research was located in educational settings and concentrated on self-development through collaborative endeavour. Such research, specifically located in my own practice with the intention of changing and improving that practice, was characterised by Reason and Torbert (2001, p17) as first person research practice. In 1992 I was part of a focus group attached to a European funded project, the Management of Organisational and Human Development (MOHD). Ten action researchers from various backgrounds gathered together to discuss their main concerns and identify key questions about research within organisations. As our conversations developed, questions in relation to our personal experiences of methodological ambiguity and its effect on our development as researchers began to take precedence over organisational issues. We felt we were using an action research process to address issues, to learn and to develop knowledge in a manner that was appropriate to the task, but we did not see ourselves as following any given model of research processes found in the literature. We could not say we were following a particular path of enquiry or a spiral of action research as we kept branching off into other areas of discourse and discovery. We kept adapting our research, either by shifting our spiral to another plane, or by adding new loops and pathways. We felt, however, that this process of adding to, shifting and branching off, thinking and sifting, was important to our research. It helped us recognise inter-connectedness and complexities involved in our enquiries although it left us unable to isolate clear lines of progression. We then felt unsure where to go next in our enquiry and often described ourselves as 'being in a mess'. Comfort was not found through consulting accounts of other action research projects. They appeared to have followed relatively untroubled methodological paths and like Thomas we felt that their accounts tended to involve:

...categorisation, crystallisation, codification, making things clear, taking a line, developing constructs through which the world can be viewed. They are logical, clear, tidy, parsimonious, rational, consistent. The disordered or undisciplined is frowned upon and rejected. (Thomas, 1998, p142)

We saw a gap between our more convoluted practice and published models of neat research. This led to doubts as to whether we were doing '*proper research*' or whether we were doing '*research properly*'. Perceptions of self as researcher tended to be linked to portrayals in the literature of neat and tidy research models. Not following a path that others had apparently successfully negotiated led to feelings of being deviant. One participant in the MOHD project felt that:

It's not really action research or anything like that because action research to me is something where you have got a fairly clear plan, you do some observation and you act and you monitor it and there is a fairly clear cycle. (Cook, 1998, p97)

When researchers informally describe their research, be they novice or experienced, they invariably recount being 'in a mess' at some point. That mess occurs in research appears to be generally accepted but is usually absent from published accounts: it was not included in methodological outlines or summative descriptions and was never advocated as a process to be undertaken as part of the research cycle/spiral/model. We speculated that other researchers also experienced times of mess whilst engaged in their endeavours but that they chose not to report the messy sections as to do so might be seen as inappropriate and/or undesirable by the writers. Mess tends to have connotations of being sloppy, of not being a good researcher. By tidying away the 'messy area', however, we believed that research reports were not only giving researchers a false sense of what participation in research might look and feel like but also were not reporting what we were beginning to articulate as a valuable part of the process itself. What the role of mess might be and where it sits in the methodological descriptions therefore remained relatively unexamined.

### ***Why articulate the mess?***

Mess needs to be articulated, firstly, because it is there. It is the 'swampy lowlands' identified by Schön (1983). If accounts of research omit descriptions of the messy areas experienced by so many researchers, descriptions of research in practice remain incomplete and do not offer a true and honest picture of the research process.

Secondly, denial of the existence of mess may undermine the confidence of researchers who find themselves 'in a mess'. Mellor (1999) talked honestly about the personal mess he found himself in when overwhelmed by data for his PhD. Rather than seeing this as a part of the process of enquiry he saw it as his own particular problem; was he an inadequate researcher? He was driven by a presumed need to find a pattern in things and to put things in their place. This general obsession with clarity, specificity and the definite, is, states Law (2004) commonly found in descriptions of research and shape our perceptions of what 'good' research should look like.

Thirdly, as it exists, regardless of its lack of public face, I believed mess must have a purpose, the identification of which became central to my deliberations. If descriptions of the processes of engaging with mess remain unreported in methodological accounts, its existence not acknowledged despite its endemic nature, its purpose would be lost to open debate and

discussion. Staying hidden meant it would continue to be inappropriately characterised as negative and it would remain misunderstood and under-utilised.

What is articulated strengthens itself and what is not articulated tends towards non-being (Heaney, quoting Czeslaw Milosz, 1999, no page numbers)

### ***Ways of seeing***

In research, having multiple view points, where each new view and theory is a springboard for further reflection, is an important way of finding new ways of seeing. Drawing inspiration from those who specialise in using different milieu to see can help develop understandings about what is happening when we use collective self-reflection as part of the research process and how we might use the articulation of multiple perspectives that such ways of seeing can engender. David Hockney (artist), when addressing the problem of depicting both what he could see and what the viewer could see, employed the use of a collage of multiple view points to 'break down the wall between the viewer and the view' (Hockney, 1998:60). This way of presenting visual information allowed more to be seen, from a number of perspectives, and enabled viewers to engage with the sweep of the artists gaze (Hockney, 1982). When multi-faceted reflections on practice are brought together in one space, this too can provide opportunities for new ways of seeing, thinking and theorising.

The Cubists, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde art movement, depicted their subjects from a multitude of viewpoints and perspectives. The subjects of the painting were broken up, analysed, re-assembled and re-presented in a way that meant the viewer had to engage with the image in an active and enquiring manner. Seeing was no longer easy; the view was muddled; understandings were challenged. When considering the importance of Cubism to his own thinking, Hockney reflected that the multiple viewpoints used by the Cubists not only created a far bigger space but allowed the artist and viewer the facility to move within that space rather than settle in one area.

Cubism was about the destruction of a fixed way of looking. A fixed position implies we are standing still, that even the eye is still. Yet we all know our eyes move constantly, and the only time they stop moving is when we're dead – or when we are staring. And if we're staring we're not really looking. (Hockney, 2004, p102)

As artistic representations moved from 'life-like' to complex representations, the work became more than a transfer of meaning from artist to viewer. The viewer had to work hard to organise the information that has been offered and as such become engaged in the process of meaning making. Collaborative/participatory research is a way of facilitating engagement in multiple perspectives, capturing kaleidoscopic views and finding new ways of interpreting

what is seen. Such a kaleidoscopic lens, providing a new or alien view (Sanger, 1994) can enhance opportunities to see beneath the generally perceived and accepted view. When participants and researchers work together they mimic a kaleidoscopic lens to work with the myriad of ideas that occur in the mess of research. It is not easy and participants may wish to reject it for the comfort of a single lens view. This way of seeing does, however, offer greater insight into what underpins participant understandings and theorising and what creates effective and informed transformation of practice: the action turn (Reason 2001).

### ***Ways of knowing***

The work of philosopher Roland Barthes (1982), in particular his notion of *studium* and *punctum*, offers a way of conceptualising mess and its purpose in relation to revealing what is known and what could be known through the application of research approaches. Barthes describes *studium* as the general awareness, recognition, even enthusiastic commitment we have for certain photographs, objects or events that we recognise and with which we can affiliate. Such events can be aligned with our knowledge and previous experience and coded against what we already know. Coding is part of the comfort of *studium*. Even if the ideas are disturbing, such as aggression or hate for example, we have the codes for their identification. The *studium* contains the common 'rules' by which we frame our seeing.

The *punctum* is an area we are aware of but cannot code for. We know it is there but not what it contains or how to articulate it at that point in time. It is a place of hidden (or tacit) knowing. It resides just beneath the surface of our conscious recognition and cannot yet be articulated; whilst there it is yet to be known. If the *studium* has the 'rules' the *punctum* is where we have to improvise based on both our knowledge of those rules and the need to move into new spaces. Its presence is felt, it disturbs and unsettles, but it is not explicit. In photography Barthes could recognise the aspect of the photograph that contained the *punctum*, but not articulate the *punctum* itself. In research we are aware of the *punctum* but may shy away from articulating its presence given our presumed need to be definite, to **know** rather than risk engaging with half understood ideas and theories that have yet to emerge and crystallise.

Hauling apart rhetoric and reframing and developing new ways forward is likely to be a variable, unstable and messy process. When participants and researchers zigzag between intuitive and analytical modes of thinking thoughts and ideas are not immediately clear. Conditions for knowing are located where participants in research flounder and then find their way again, where tensions are held and dissipated. The 'messy area' is formed where participants have deconstructed well rehearsed notions of practice and aspects of old beliefs, are aware of the dawning of the new, but as yet have not made sense of it. It is where

“mutually incompatible alternatives” (Feyerabend, 1975) are debated and wrestled with and where co-labouring takes place. Co-labouring involves engaging in

“...toil, distress, trouble: exertions of the faculties of the body or mind...an activity which is at times likely to be uncomfortable” (Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 1993:393)

Where co-labouring takes place it is likely that confusing ‘messes’, incapable of resolution through the imposition of predetermined technical frameworks, will reside. This ‘messy area’ is a forum for the exchange of perceptions and beliefs, a place of co-construction where strands of knowledge and learning are unearthed and critiqued. These strands ultimately act as catalysts for new knowing leading to development and change. It is the space for imaginative freedom and new ideas. It is a place to celebrate “The importance of not always knowing what you are doing” Atkinson and Claxton (2000). In this space the four ‘knowings’, postulated by Reason (2001) come together and jostle with each other. These are:

- i) experiential knowing (knowing through empathy and resonance that is almost impossible to put into words);
- ii) presentational knowing (that which emerges from experiential knowing and provides its first expression through forms of imagery such as poetry, story and so on;
- iii) propositional knowing (that comes through ideas and theories and is expressed in abstract language) and
- iv) practical knowing (‘how to’ do something: the skill or competence).

The ‘messy area’ can now be framed as a communicative space where participants delve into individual and collaborative understanding to disturb current knowing. It is a place where expert (practitioner) knowledge, experience, judgement, creativity and intuition are used to embrace multiple and new ways of seeing. The ‘messy area’ is the punctum.

The combination of perceiving, knowing, critiquing and learning from multiple perspectives enables participants to articulate notions of theory or practice that they may not have been able to see if their own perceptions had not been critiqued by the ideas of others. When the general picture enjoyed by practitioners is punctured, and the articulation of the ‘almost known’ becomes an imperative, the ‘messy area’ provides the space for clarification of the already known (explicit knowledge) and what is nearly known (implicit or tacit knowledge). This is the precursor to the creation of something entirely new (transformational knowledge). Destabilising and disrupting ways of thinking can offer ways into creativity and erudition affording a space for participatory learning. When new understandings are revealed, developed and articulated, this is the ‘messy turn’.

### ***The messy turn: experiences from practice***



Over the last 12 years I have been using action research for a variety of purposes: for self development, service development and evaluation, knowledge-building, communication, development and change *within* systems and change *of* systems, for the benefit of participants (both short and long-term benefit) and the benefit of organisations. Now, as my professional role encompasses a range of funded research and evaluation projects, I am most likely to be engaged in developing facilitated collaborative action research in and across organisations (characterised by Reason and Torbert (2001) as third person research practice). This work has provided me with opportunities to practice research and evaluation using the 'messy area' to facilitate a 'messy turn'. Experiences from one commission to evaluate the implementation of inclusive policy in practice across early years settings in an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP)<sup>1</sup> are used here to demonstrate the purpose and importance of the 'messy area' and subsequent 'messy turn' to transformational research.

The nature of the work with the EYDCP was to make an account of, and account for, inclusive practice using three dimensions: understanding notions of inclusion, making it work in practice and knowing what enabled it to take place (see Cook, 2004). The remit was to investigate contexts for development rather than the intrinsic worth of the programme itself. I chose a facilitated collaborative action research (CAR) approach to draw upon and develop a theory of group dynamics that accepts that people act and respond to situations based on the meaning those situations hold for them. Such meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (symbolic interaction) to engage participants in thinking, reflecting, learning and delivering change. I particularly wanted to explore both the use of collaborative research as a process of co-construction through learning and how it might act as a bridge between theoretical understandings and practical change.

All early years and childcare settings in the city were invited to participate in the project. The only criterion for acceptance on the project was that they had to be committed to developing more inclusive practice in their setting. Nine settings drawn from toy libraries, childminders, out of school clubs, private and voluntary nurseries, playgroups, parent and toddler groups and LEA nursery provision, participated in the project. Each setting had a mentor who came to a monthly meeting to engage with notions of inclusion and establish a broad set of agreed indicators of inclusion. Their role was then to support the establishment of setting-based research projects using the indicators as starting points. The setting based research focussed on a particular aspect of inclusive practice chosen by that setting (whether that be with children, families or other professionals). Practitioners within each setting then worked with mentors to develop a small research project. The notion of 'authentic participation'

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<sup>1</sup> New Labour policy initiative towards integrated childcare settings: UK

where participants share “in the way research is conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world” (McTaggart 1997:28), was at the forefront of this work. All participant researchers collected data, had active involvement in its analysis and instigated change based on their work. They were researchers, teachers, thinkers, learners, innovators and evaluators but, as one participant researcher confirmed, this was hard work!

It was hard, especially at the beginning because you [the project co-ordinator] didn't really tell us what to do, but then I realised that you couldn't anyway and we had to do the thinking (Participant Researcher: EYDCP Project)

The thoughts of Goldsworthy, an artist who works with the elements of the natural world, mirrors the type of struggles we, as participant researchers, engage with.

I have become aware of how nature is in a state of change and how that change is the key to understanding. I want my art to be sensitive and alert to changes in material, season and weather...I am sometimes left stranded by a change in the weather with half-understood feelings that have to travel with me until conditions are right for them to reappear. (Goldsworthy, 1990, no page numbers).

He recognises that opposites and conflicts, whilst uncomfortable, are creative tensions which he uses to “sharpen my relationship with nature” and which he refuses to resolve prematurely to make his own position easier. Yet within the EYDCP project these areas of discomfort were often seen as negative. Participant researchers were unhappy with unfamiliar views and were often striving to tidy away anything that was disturbing their equilibrium rather than engage with different viewpoints. Stepping outside everyday presuppositions and working beliefs, mining the tacit underpinnings that frame perceptions of reality, led to a loss of certainty for the researchers. Where challenges took place to current orthodoxies, both personal and organisational, commonly held understandings and ways of practicing had to be re-examined, critiqued and in some cases relinquished.

Engaging with dialectical processes that genuinely prise apart familiar ideologies and facilitate the move from recognising multiple interpretations to a critiqued synthesis for reformed, committed action (praxis), is complex. It can be an exciting place to be, as articulated by a participant in a recent facilitated collaborative action research project.

I just love having information and coming up with new things for it. Just love it... I've got my little drug going where I've had all the discussion and everything going. And information going and flying all over the place. And it's just like, Yessss!....Aye. I just love learning. (Cook and Inglis, 2007, p56)

but, as demonstrated by a participant in the EYDCP project, very frustrating.

If you just tell me what to do, I will do it, I'm getting lost in all this thinking. (Cook, 2004, p12)

Some participant researchers in the EYDCP project felt as though they were floundering when bombarded with many ideas that they felt unable to fit into current frameworks they had for knowing in practice. They had to both build on and let go of some of their beliefs and understanding to make room for the new meanings revealed through collaborative critique and reflection on their actions. Personally held theories of inclusion were challenged by both their own stories of inclusion from practice and those of others. One participant researcher described how the work of defining inclusion in her setting highlighted the need to make changes in order for the setting to become more inclusive, and, more importantly, who needed to make those changes.

I think we had been fairly at an integration level [as opposed to inclusion]. Now it's not just the case of people coming into the nursery and fitting in with our routine ... it's about us changing too. (Cook, 2004, p11)

Recognising the need to reassess her practice in terms of what being inclusive really meant, another participants researcher realised that whilst she had thought she was being inclusive, there were still issues to address:

Although we had accepted him into our playgroup, he was only in the building and now we had to work on helping him be part of what goes on here. That is the difference really, the difference I now see between integration and inclusion. (Cook, 2004, p11)

Deconstructing the notion of inclusion had taken them into the 'messy area' of what it might mean to be inclusive. The 'messy turn' occurred where their thinking changed due to their engagement with the mess. Changes in thinking led a personal need to change practice rather than an external directed change the basis for which may not have been well understood or well received. For example all the settings had identified themselves as inclusive already and requiring a change in the way they carried out their inclusive policies, without engaging in understanding the need for such change, was likely to meet with some resistance. One participant researcher explained that deconstructing the notion of inclusion and inclusion in practice had radically altered policy and practice in her setting.

Our initial comments when we first started on the project were that we thought that our policy was a good one. And we didn't know where we were going to improve it but we knew that were we open to do that...but it has changed beyond recognition really...we had to do that because of what we know now. (Participant researcher: EYDCP project)

However, the gap between wanting to improve and the improvement, entering the 'messy area' of change and recognising what change was necessary (achieving a 'messy turn') could

be somewhat tense and uncomfortable. Participants did not like the feeling of '*being in limbo*' and a number agreed with this participant who said:

There were times when I thought none of us knew what we were doing anymore and I don't really like that feeling. We had these good ideas and every time we talked about them someone would say 'ahh, but...', - often that was you [the facilitator]...(laughs). And sometimes you wanted to say well if you don't like my idea you tell me what you think it should be or keep your ideas to yourself. I think we grumbled a bit at times. But I'm glad you didn't tell us now 'cos once we realised where our ideas fitted together it made much more sense for the playgroup – and for the children and parents I think. (Participant researcher: EYDCP project).

Engaging with the mess is, as Mellor (1999) states,

...a complex process of inquiry, involving a wide range of techniques, where messy is taken to mean difficult, not careless. (Abstract: PhD thesis).

The 'messy area' is a tough place to be. It does not signify lazy behaviour rather it is an indicator of serious critique taking place. We have to work for and wait for knowing; wait for 'messy turns'. More than one 'messy turn' might occur following a messy stage and this may necessitate re-entering a 'messy area' before a way forward can be gouged out and agreed. Engaging with the 'messy area' and 'messy turn' is part of the hermeneutics and has epistemological importance in the forming and grounding of new understandings leading to new knowledge and change in practice: the 'messy turn'.

Every so often I feel as birds must before their first migration – a gut instinct that something is wrong where they are, a strong sense that they must now go where they have never been before. (Goldsworthy: 1990: no page numbers).

### ***Facilitating the messy turn***

Entering the 'messy area' can be professionally and personally uncomfortable but vital to research that seeks to engage in contesting knowledge leading to changes in practice. If people are comfortable in the 'studium', within the general framework they use for understanding their work, it can become difficult to move beyond that phase. It is difficult for those who are embedded in their work (and workplace stories) to take themselves from the descriptive mode to the analytical especially when an immediate consequence of such dialectical engagement can be that participants are left open to feelings of confusion, doubt and uncertainty rather than enlightenment. There are times when participant researchers need support to move from the studium to the punctum and to experience a 'messy turn'.

Mellor (2001) articulated the difficulties he experienced when faced with trying to make meaning from what he termed 'serendipitous thoughts' contained in his original notes.

I am amazed to find my notes suddenly becoming 'knowledge'. Colin [supervisor] could do that, I could not.  
... It is a giant, terrifying leap for me to do that. (p 471)

This is where a facilitator with the skills to both support disruption in participants' thinking, whilst at the same time enable them to maintain sufficient confidence in themselves as knowledgeable practitioners, has an important part to play. In the work with the EYDCP I had taken on a role as facilitator both to allow participants in the research to undertake their own thinking, learning and planning and to capture what Hogan (2002, p3) terms 'The serendipities that emerge from people and groups working towards joint goals'. Like Stringer (1999) I came to see that my expertise and knowledge of research processes was often secondary to my role as a facilitator. My role as a facilitator was to open the floor to discussion in a stimulating way, to get ideas into the open, to help members of the group listen to each other, debate and reflect. Hunter et al (1993) characterise facilitation as an artful dance, with the role of the facilitator offering:

...an opportunity to dance with life on the edge of a sword – to be present and aware – to be with and for people in a way that cuts through to what enhances and fulfils life. (Hunter et al, 1993:1, in Hogan, 2002, p51)

It was important to help participants use reflection as critique; as a way of moving beyond normative states of fitting happenings into previously experienced frameworks (creating a studium), towards a vision of what could be constructed from the bringing together of a range of knowings to harvest new meanings for practice from the debate (a 'messy turn').

The role of a facilitator differs from that of chairperson at a meeting who might focus on reviewing progress and agreeing action by working through a strict agenda (Cameron, 2001). Facilitation, in the context of the work presented here, has the primary intention of enabling people to interact both with their own thoughts and ideas and those of others. The facilitator leads participants into the 'messy area' and then supports them in moving forward *within* the mess, and *with* the mess, towards a 'messy turn'. It is about helping people "get their wading boots on" and do "the mucking out" (Caro-Bruce, 2000:106). Facilitated CAR is used as dialectic to puncture and critique a general picture enjoyed by practitioners that may mask underlying issues and to reveal complexities not previously articulated. It is to enable participants to recognise their own current understandings and those of others: to be more comfortable about living and working in changing environments and to enable new ways of working to be revealed and articulated. The facilitation role is not to find or establish a new framework or a final truth but to keep conversations going. It helps provide a lens for new ways of seeing; the precondition for a 'messy turn'.

### ***Mess as rigour***

Lincoln and Guba (2000, pp178-80) have identified a bifurcation of what they term the “extended controversy about validity” into two key arguments; one arguing for interpretive rigour, the second arguing for rigour in the application of method. Accepting the need to recognise the different roles interpretation and methods play in ensuring rigour in research design, the ‘messy area’ has a role to play as both an interpretive tool and as method. Looking firstly at the role of mess in interpretative rigour and the contribution it makes toward the debate about the embeddedness of practitioners in research, and going on to consider the impact of the messy area and subsequent messy turn on the validity of research, this paper now reunites them in research in practice.

### ***Interpretative Rigour***

Traditionally, one indicator of rigorous research has been the distance between the interpreter and their subject. Talking about the use of investigator distance in evaluations Scriven (1997) argues that when the evaluator is distanced from participants in a project, and not drawn into the complexity of their discussions, their perceptions and formulations about what constitutes programme quality are less likely to be distorted towards those of the participants. Externally imposed measures and indicators have traditionally been held up as more objective on the basis as they are less likely to encompass bias.

....the closer we come to them [distance and objectivity], the more accurate our conclusions are likely to be, other things being equal. (Scriven 1997: 483)

He considers the cost of deviation from this policy as being far too high to make an alternative general policy acceptable.

Tempering validity with mercy (or the like) is a violation of validity – and validity is the highest professional imperative... (Scriven 1997: 483)

It is argued that situating research in participatory engagement can lead to the danger of losing critical perspective. If the researcher remains aloof their judgements are characterised as being untainted by participants who are perceived as necessarily biased towards their own particular beliefs and ways of working. Building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is, however, considered to be central to an effective action research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Reason and Torbert 2001). Stakeholders are not separate from reality; their reality is the dynamic part of the picture and it is their notions of reality that ultimately shape practice. It is argued that claims for accountability that use

predetermined preconceptions and standardised external measures are not always helpful in making judgements about the relative merits of programmes and practices. Externally imposed systems and measure are not necessarily sufficiently finely tuned to enable researchers and evaluators to get to the heart of what gives a project or programme meaning. They can be a blunt tool that reduces the 'knowing about' complex situation to the measures of particular variables. Blumer (1969) warned, however, that remaining aloof as a so-called 'objective' observer, refusing to take the role of the acting unit is:

...to risk the worst kind of subjectivism – the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (Blumer, 1969, p86)

The embeddedness of practitioners in research is the subject of many learned discussions in respect of rigour (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, Winter, 1989, Seale and Silverman, 1997, Bradbury and Reason, 2001). Suggesting that evaluators and participants might work together in making decisions about worthwhileness, good practice and quality using an insider-researcher/evaluator approach requires a paradigmatic shift from an approach aimed at proving something against a given standard. Grounded in a theory of learning that uses a symbolic interactionist/social constructivist approach, and based on Freire's (1972) belief that a pedagogy which can help people must be forged *with* them not *for them*, the 'messy area' is a milieu for the revealing of tacit or hidden theories, beliefs and realities that frame actions. As Somekh (2002) suggests:

...knowledge constructed without the active participation of practitioners can only be partial knowledge. (Somekh, 2002, p90)

If we accept that we are agents who act in the world on the basis of our own sense-making, and that human community involves mutual sense-making, then to do research **on** rather than **with** people can exclude much of the knowledge in context, especially tacitly held knowledge. It is however, beholden on researchers to capture the very essence of what is under scrutiny. When investigating the lynch pins of programme/organisational effectiveness and drivers for change, a search for *what is* (or even *what has been*) and how it is currently perceived, is less likely to offer information about programme quality, and less likely to be a sound basis for programme development, than one where notions of quality have been disturbed to capture the essence of programme complexity. Capturing and negotiating personal realities within a discursive milieu (the 'messy area') provides a communicative and dialectic engagement that allows understandings of philosophies, principles and practice to surface. As such it reduces opportunities for building practice on rhetoric and builds in fought-for interpretations that go beyond the individual, lending both triangulatory (the need to bring together different data,

methods and theoretical schemes to contest knowing) and construct validity (the way in which the research recognises the perspectives of the participants as opposed to importing predetermined frameworks) to the process. Manning (1997), in her discussion of the notion of a 'properly done study' in constructivist inquiry, describes an array of authenticity that is found in 'appropriate and informed choices' [her words] made by researchers rather than a single path to be followed. Validity is not about straightjacketing research into the known, but a discipline that forces us to question, critique and engage with data in a way that allows us to delve into various forms of knowing.

Lather (1986, 1986a, 1991, 1993) has consistently argued against the use of singular notions of validity. As well as triangulatory and construct validity (see above) she describes face validity; the need to check that what is found makes sense to participants (that they recognise the story being told) and catalytic validity; which

...represents the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it (Lather, 1986, p276).

These notions of validity are particular pertinent to the argument for mess as rigour where mess is seen as the space for contesting interpretations. Through facilitating argumentative interpretations of perceptions of theory (both professional and academic) and practice, the 'messy area' aids participants to delve beneath rhetoric into deeper knowing. If research merely describes what we already know, rather than revealing what we nearly know or could learn about together, it is likely to restrict programme development to what is rather than what could be. Suggesting that collaborative engagement in mess might be part of a process of building rigour into a research process requires a shift in perception. It is clear, however, that it can provide the context for purposeful change based on shared, but mutually contested, interpretations and understandings and hence has a vital role to play.

#### *Method as rigour*

If one type of rigour is distance and its impact on interpretation, another has been characterised as method. Practice that fits neatly into given research frameworks has historically been associated with reliability and credibility. Rigorous research can then be seen as that which has followed a given method providing the wherewithal to reproduce and replicate that particular research practice. The construction of adherence to method as rigour has therefore led to regulatory procedures in respect of method that masquerade as guardians of rigour, quality and credibility. Writing about quantitative research and its emphasis on reliability and replicability, Deutscher et al (1993) suggest that a consequence of the over-reliance on method as rigour can be that:



... we may have been learning a great deal about how to pursue an incorrect course with a maximum of precision (Deutscher et al, 1993, p25)

The pull towards a neat model of research has the possibility of limiting researchers to reporting *what fits* rather than *what is* or finding out *what could be*. Carr (1997) recounts that, in ancient Greece, adhering to an agreed procedure was seen as an alternative to the difficulties of philosophising in seeking truth.

Law (2004) suggests that if adhering to method and the neatness of a research process is construed seen as an indicator of rigour this can lead to the “systematic exclusion of mess”. Law’s main argument for the inclusion of mess in research reports was, however, for the acceptance of methodological pluralism, and pluralism of method, with mess occurring where pluralities merged. My argument, whilst linked with that of Law, is that mess is an integral and purposeful part of the process of research, not merely a description of where approaches merge, and has an important and dynamic part to play in getting below rhetoric and achieving interpretative rigour. If this is so, then by including a ‘messy area’ into a collaborative research we build in an arena for contesting knowledge and meaning making across all participants thus generating an argument for the “systematic inclusion of mess” to build rigour into method.

### **Mess takes its place**

Thomas (1998), taken by the idea that “finding out is best done by a kind of anarchy” (p156), suggested that significant additions to knowledge are characterised by departures from, as opposed to adherence to, method. I conclude, however, that anarchic as it may initially seem, for rigorous research to take place researchers need to both create and delve into the ‘messy area’. The ‘messy area’ and the subsequent ‘messy turn’ should be recognised as part of the action research approach and celebrated as part of a process that encourages and legitimises exploration and development. Rather than prejudging the ‘messy area’ as negative we need to celebrate the positive role it plays in creating depth and rigour within the participatory research process. Winter (2000:1) suggests that descriptions of action research need to get “sufficiently close to the underlying structure to enable others to see potential similarities with other situations”. I argue that mess can be facilitative of this process and therefore needs to be recorded and interpreted as a vital element in transformational research. The systematic exclusion of mess hides from public view the area where we engage in the ‘difficult thinking’, the place where unlearning and learning takes place, the area that forges change in practice. Such exclusions can obscure both the pivotal point and the purpose of the action research process from view and so make it difficult for future

researchers to understand how outcomes were achieved and how they might build on those outcomes.

The 'messy area' is not an easy place to be. The road in and out is not clearly defined and is unlikely to be direct or smooth. The 'messy area' itself is unsettling, worrying, exciting and challenging. It is disruptive of habit and custom. The purpose of entering this mess is to enable and allow new directions to emerge; to enable diversity and multiplicity to work together to challenge the given, to recognise the nearly known and to support the creation of trustworthy, transformational knowing. The honest embodiment of the mess, its process, practice and purpose, will help researchers understand the drivers behind changes in thinking and transformational action in enquiry; how to reach the 'messy turn'. If an indicator of our successful work as action researchers is the integration of the development of practice with the construction of research knowledge then we must provide honest accounts of that process and incorporate mess as an integral part a rigorous approach.

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