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“Messses”:

Russell Ackoff’s term “messes” sums up one of the ways a great many action researchers differ from their conventional social science colleagues. Messes are complex, multi-dimensional, intractable, dynamic problems that can only be partially address and partially resolved. Yes, for most action researchers, messes are attractive and even exciting. We gravitate toward them, not with the “magic bullet” but with the confidence that, together with the legitimate stakeholders in the mess, we can do something to improve the situation.

Just how action researchers come to have this way of living in the world is not at all clear. Nearly all of us have conventional disciplinary training built on a Fordist division of intellectual labor, hermetic professional hierarchies, and disciplinary peer control systems of ranking and reward. No way of organizing intellectual life could be more antithetical to engagement with messes because messes require the recognition of the limitations and weaknesses of single discipline knowledge systems and methods and engage us in collaboration, not only with other disciplines, but with non-academic partners.

Some of this emerges directly from ethical and political commitments. As convenient as Fordism is, it makes it impossible to address any significant social issue. Those action researchers committed to social change necessarily have to deal with messes; we follow the problems wherever they take us, learning the theories, methods, and processes we need opportunistically along the way. Whatever our uncertainties, we seem to tolerate them because we are committed to changing the world in some positive way.

Another element of this is, I think, a kind of fundamental sociability that shines through in all the contributions from the editorial board members. We find joy in being with others, in working passionately in groups, in brainstorming, in struggling together. We don’t like to be alone in our work. Again, the contrast with the isolated disciplinary scholastic hero with 20 books, hundreds of articles, and a solitary life is sharp.

And there is a clear legacy of pragmatism and feminism that helps explain our penchant for messes. As a group, we seem to enjoy “embodied” intellectual practice. We never leave our corporeality; we are engaged in constant cycles of reflection and action in which our bodies and ourselves and those of our collaborators and not only present to us but essential to the very process of understanding messes. Pain, joy, fear, bravery, love, rage – all are present in our action research lives. We do not flee from them; we rather seem to gravitate toward them as a source of energy and inspiration.

Finally, I think there is a kind of “aesthetic” at work here in action research that I have met before in my previous work on the difficult reception of Darwinism and in the conflict between Darwinian and pseudo-Darwinian worldviews. Whatever else Darwin was, he was a thinker infatuated with messes. His vision

of evolution, of speciation, and of the natural world was based on the ambiguity, dynamism, and complexity of the world. That complexity, which he summed up as the “tangled bank” was beautiful to him, endlessly dynamic, puzzling, and surprising. Darwinism’s detractors hate this worldview: they want neat, orderly, mechanical story in which the moral is clear and the compartments between things are hermetically sealed. For them, beauty is found in neatness.

During the many years I taught and wrote about this, I found that some people, given a choice, found the Darwinian worldview attractive and others found it deeply threatening. On reflection, I see action researchers as people who, for whatever reason, take joy in complexity, dynamism, and puzzles. This shows through in so much of our writing and storytelling. We love paradoxes, puzzles, and survive them through a sense of their beauty and some kind of sense of humor as well.

When non-action research colleagues greet us with fear and hostility, I am inclined to attribute this defensive reaction, in part, to their sense that we have a worldview that is too dynamic, too unstable, and too ugly to be acceptable. As these aesthetic matters are fundamentally non-negotiable in my experience, perhaps action research is not a profession but a vocation only available to those with a worldview that welcomes messes.

Universities:

Though a great many action researchers do not have university affiliations and not a few would actively reject them, there can be no question that universities are a key institution for action research. Even if we were trained wrong, nearly all of us were trained in universities. Many of us make our living at universities and we struggle to make our messages about action research heard in university forums. We routinely rail against the “positivists” and the “disengaged” academics, thereby creating a moral high ground for ourselves that treats the university non-action researchers as “them” versus “us”. This seductive sense of superiority is widespread in action research conversations. Universities are easy targets, so large and so badly managed that almost any rock we throw will hit something.

But our collective lack of attention to universities is worrisome. Where is the causal analysis of the dynamics that make universities behave as they do? Where are the practical strategies for transformation of universities into real “learning organizations” at the service of the “people”? Why are we content to permit universities to continue to train social researchers badly and then try to convert them later into action researchers? I vividly remember our late friend and colleague, Donald Schön, at the end of a wonderful workshop day in which we had all outdone ourselves being smart and collaborative, saying “If we are so smart, why did action research die in universities?” He went on to say that he did not want to be right and defeated again.

All the editorial board members appear confident that action research has somehow survived and is more prominent now than it has been for a generation or two. There is little inquiry to explain what that has happened or what might be

done to sustain and expand it. To live up to Don's challenge, however, requires an effort that most action researchers in a position to do so are not yet making – beyond the paradigm clarifications, the critiques of positivism, the ethical exhortations – an effort to understand and change the conditions that continue to produce undemocratic and disengaged social research.

It is not enough to be right and comfortably better than others; if we really believe what we say about action research, then we have to bend our efforts to the comprehensive reform of universities because they are institutions with so much power and so many resources that ignoring them means that we are likely to live out Don's fear of being right and defeated again.

Nearly all the members of the editorial board ha One of the almost absent topics is the university itself. Other than a place of study or frustration, there is almost nothing on the extraordinary role of universities in promoting anti-action research and anti-social research activities. It is as if the AR community either see itself as a kind of interloper or does not want to confront these huge power structures head-on. Not much of a recipe for success, this.