Editorial:
Action research, action learning and community services
Phil Crane

This edition of ALARj has a focus on the contribution of action learning and action research to the development of community services, particularly non-profit community services. The landscape of community services has been changing rapidly in recent decades, and can be typified by the notion of complexity. Complexity in the nature of issues that services seek to respond to, complexity in the policy environment and systems of support that have tended to silo and compartmentalise problems and people, and complexity in the institutional location non-profit services occupy in ‘helping’ those who are seen as ‘in need’ or marginalised.

In addition to being typified by complexity the environment in which community services are located is also highly dynamic, undergoing profound and ongoing change as approaches to understanding and responding to human need increasingly emphasise the individualisation of risk and the demonstration of outcomes, through policies which combine targeting with market principles such as choice, competition and quality. How can long held values of empowerment, care, inclusivity, relationship and benefit to individuals and communities have expression in community services as they grapple with the challenges of being viable and relevant in such a dynamically changing environment?

This edition brings together a range of contributions which speak to these challenges. The thematic through these is that in contexts typified by complexity processes are needed which engage
services and their communities in ongoing dialogue and processes of inquiry about how they can best proceed. Further the character of such processes needs to be purposeful, contextually sensitive, iterative and participatory. Action learning and action research can provide processes with this character.

The first article in this edition examines the challenges facing the Australian not-for-profit disability sector. By David Rosenbaum and colleagues, it is chosen to lead off as it provides a useful overview of some of the profound changes taking place in how community services are funded, the challenges this poses for not-for-profit services, and how a participatory form of action learning can assist services respond. The relevance of this article goes well beyond its particular context.

The article by David Moxley and colleagues outlines how community based participatory action research and development processes can be used to develop prototype innovations, or what are termed small ‘start ups’. Given the challenges of resource scarcity faced by many community services and practitioners, how to conceptualise change processes so they can start from modest unfunded beginnings is important and timely. As the song by Kev Carmody says ‘from little things big things grow’.

Robert Sommer highlights through a very engaging narrative account the potential for serendipity in participatory action research processes where the skills in data analysis can be limited and the service culture sensitive.

The constructs used to frame people’s lives and issues matter. The article by Melissa Walker and colleagues illustrates how a frame of improving wellness rather than a focus on disease underpins the feminist participatory action research undertaken by and with Indigenous Australian women in north Brisbane. This paper builds on the growing recognition of the relevance of yarning as a successful method for undertaking Indigenous research.
Michael Beattie’s article explores how as a non-Indigenous community development worker he should undertake research practice in a manner consistent with the values of participatory action research and Indigenist research methodology. He outlines his reflective development of a social framework to guide and explain the methods of interaction he identified as allowing him to practice in a way consistent with Indigenous self-determination.

The relationship between universities and community services is shifting as each looks to the other to assist them with challenges core to their respective missions. Both are interested in research and both generally articulate a mission about social benefit and contribution. The article by O’Connor and colleagues is located at this intersection examining the use of participatory action research as a framework for ‘service learning’ where university students assist non-profit community services to explore questions those services see as critical. Service learning aims to encourage students to gain a greater understanding of social justice, privilege and disadvantage this being seen as an important aspect of education for practice in the community. For community services, particularly those small and medium sized organisations which do not have their own research units, this means increasingly seeing themselves as active participants in research and inquiry rather than passive recipients of ‘best practice’.

Action research and action learning have the demonstrated capacity to engage, activate, explore and transform, both in terms of what happens and our understandings of what happens. The article by Joy Murray and colleagues discusses a situation many in community sector work commonly face - a disconnect between what funders have in mind and how this will be evidenced, and what is meaningful and useful to the people who become involved in such projects within communities. Questions about the nature of community leadership and what constitutes sustainable outcomes are explored through a cybernetic lens.
This edition concludes with a conceptual paper which reflects on a panel discussion at the 2012 ALARA Conference involving a number of contributing authors to the book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World*. Given the themes of complexity and dynamic ongoing change which typify the context within which community services are located, this reflecting on the broader location of action research as a broad strategy for achieving social justice and sustainable development is a fitting conclusion to this edition of the ALAR Journal.

Action learning and action research has the capacity to make a substantial contribution to the central mission of community services: that of improving the situations of people. However for this potential to be realised it is important for collaborative inquiry processes to become embedded in how social issues are understood and responded to, and that mechanisms are developed and sustained for dialogue and inquiry that fit a wide diversity of contexts. Community services and practitioners, as well as policy makers and governments, have important roles to pay in this.

The articles in this edition have been double peer reviewed. Thanks very much to the Editorial Panel for this edition (listed alphabetically) Ross Colliver, Bob Dick, Jo Durham, Deb Duthie, Susan Goff, Judith Kearney, Ron Passfield, Wendy Rowe, Shankar Sankaran, Yoland Wadsworth, and Lesley Wood.

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