

Editorial

Virginia Kaufman Hall

Why am I writing this for you to read?

When asked to write this editorial, I was curious to see how Action Researchers and action learners apply methods also practiced in the creative arts. I was keen to see methods common to artists and ALARA practitioners.

We don't have to be in an art gallery or a theatre to use creative or arts-based methods of inquiry. Readers already engage daily with media and street art, as viewers or readers and some as creators or co-creators. Because as researchers we aim to unpack assumptions, and make meaning out of lived experience, the writers in this journal apply creative processes to heighten our awareness and inform ways of knowing as we ask *what is going on here?* As Stefan Kaufman, a reviewer of this editorial noted, the practice of creative arts invites a decentering of subjectivity prompting us to experience something using other / different ways of seeing and being.

I see the creative arts as an active 'field' (Bourdieu, 1993), where opportunities for Action Research and Action Learning may result (intentionally) in a redistribution of power. The papers in this special edition demonstrate how effective the arts can be in applying ontological equity through creative community building, social justice, knowledge construction and Aboriginal recognition and collective self-determination – an aim of your usual editor Susan Goff, in producing this edition.

Readers are likely to have used similar methods. The term "creativity" in this edition is not limited to the 'elite' arts. In keeping with practices that support development driven by those affected, the authors in this journal show how useful and powerful

the creative arts can be as both method and theory that underpin the praxis in these pages.

It is a purpose of both my arts and research practice to inquire into how we know what we know, and to attempt to name and understand those unseen forces. For 13 years, I have been playing¹ with a group of co-researchers/ learner/educators whom we name Women Out to Lunch WOTLs². When I proposed that we perform our collective research at a Regional Arts Conference, two of the five women in our group said "...But I'm not an artist". Our proposal was accepted, we put the session together, performed our play, got positive feedback and they both changed their minds. I like to think that research – the way we like to do it, is a creative act.

One of the WOTLs put it like this:

When we talk about creative practices we mean using poetry, collage, painting, narrative, performance and other non-traditional teaching-research forms. Our ...collective work is about legitimising creativity as a way of accessing and representing meaning, understandings and knowing – research findings, some may say. (Horsfall et al, 2011)

Writers of this journal use multiple methods to assist participants to feel safe, create experiences to reveal ways of looking at the world, search for ways to uncover stories that are meaningful to the participants – the research findings and the learning outcomes.

We look for ways to tell the stories of the findings: as reviewer Judy Lovell states, we try out *synonymous and/or different modalities* to tell the stories that bridge the divide between those whose lived experience has been offered/ entrusted to those listeners

¹ One reviewer suggested 'playing' does not seriously demonstrate 13 years of sustainable reflexive practice – so I've added that extra dimension here – because I know WOTLs love to play or we wouldn't keep doing stuff together.

² Women Out to Lunch is a group of recovering academics who write and perform together. The research and development process for the 5th National Regional Arts Conference is detailed in Horsfall D. et al 2011.

/audience/ policy makers who may influence their future. And the greatest influence falls back onto the story owners themselves, as you will read.

There are many ways to tell stories – this edition has a shoebox full (as Fredericks shows us). Action Learners and Action Researchers are not afraid to use multiple strategies to both collect and tell the research/learning story. Creative innovations, expressions and media provide unlimited opportunities.

Arts in all formats tell human stories. Readers of this journal are likely to reveal stories for purposes of epistemological equity and recognition of multiple ways of knowing as your usual editor Susan Goff states:

...creative and expressive arts can break with conventions of knowing, reveal the knower to ourselves and each other in the act of knowing, lead us to unexpected questions, and usefully introduce clarity by revealing and contesting hidden assumptions of power about what there is to be known. (This publication)

I took this research approach to the development of a theatre piece: *What was that you said?* funded by ACT Health in 2008 to inquire into the tensions experienced between young people and adults who work or live with them.

Two experienced theatre directors Joe Woodward and Sally Hendrie worked with the two separate groups of young people and adults who improvised upon the frustrations they experienced communicating across the age divide. The developmental work was a series of Action Research cycles where we reflected, listened, watched and re-shaped the stories in an iterative development process. The results were performed as theatre, with the audience invited into discussions with the actors following the performances - young people, youth workers, parents and teachers. As co-director Jo Woodward states:

We would rather adopt an epistemological approach; starting with a phenomenology of our existence and how we influence and react to the seemingly invisible forces

surrounding and shaping us. Is this a purpose of art itself?
(Joe Woodward <http://www.shadowhousepits.com.au/>)

Arts practitioners, researchers and learners devise methods that are useful to enable people whose voice had been unheard to speak out, speak up and develop steps towards the change they need, want and can drive themselves with appropriate support towards what they experience and name for themselves as better lives (Brown & Harris, 2014).

The arts use research methods and researchers use artistic methods to support change and where needed, healing.

Can such an approach help Australian Defence Force soldiers and nurses make the transition from a war zone to home? General David Hurley asked this question of Sydney Theatre Company in order to produce a contemporary Australian story with the aim to enhance recovery, provide vocational opportunity and give the Australian community a sense of what its like to go to war.

The result was the production of *The Long Way Home* written by Daniel Keene, 2014. The work was informed by a research and developmental approach using group sessions, interviews and workshops in a *rank-free* environment that was called “*drama boot camp*” by the ADF participants. The play was performed by fourteen soldiers and four professional actors. Readers will be familiar with similar situations where we work with people whose lived experience has damaged their lives and know the ethics-of-care that are required (<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/A-Company-of-Soldiers-Australian-Defence-Force-and-Sydney-Theatre-Company-unite-140204/default.htm>)

Inside this edition

In this journal, we consider the use of artistic thinking and processes of researchers, learners and artists applying their trades to understanding our worlds. The focus is upon participatory approaches including those used by Indigenous cultures like

yarnin', cultural respect and protocols, mentoring the young people and learning together.

Act 1 of this special edition is set in an art gallery in Rockhampton. Browyn Fredericks introduces you to the Dharumbal and Woppaburra mob who developed their exhibition to honour NAIDOC³ week 2012 with the theme of *Spirit of the Tent Embassy 40 years on*.

Fredericks details the Action Learning and Action Research processes used with the Capricornia Arts Mob for their first collective art exhibition. The Indigenous values that underpin this work show Action Research and Action Learning praxis. A process of questioning drove the work deeper to reveal the artists' own analyses for the impact of the Tent Embassy in the Australian public consciousness. Particular care is revealed to work safely with the young people who:

...had comfort in their own Indigeneity – one that wasn't developed from fear for their life simply because they were Aboriginal. (This publication)

To address a worry that the young people may slide into a form of resistance – the work was re-visioned... in order to support their development into "*critical adults and wise Elders*".

This struck a resounding note with me as I recalled the driver that pushed me into the Action Research theatre development project *What was that you said?* It was my deep need to understand the rift between my 15 year old daughter and myself. To accept that adults and young people do conflict and that we can learn from that conflict. Research was necessary in both projects to find pathways for our young people to become *critical adults and wise Elders*. For myself as a parent it was important to learn how to step back while I learn the wisdom necessary to be an Elder.

³ National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee – annual event held over a week in the Australian national calendar to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I see the same driver in Fredericks closing words:

We seek... to challenge both ourselves and others through art. We transform lives in ripples of consciousness about Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories and Countries. (This publication)

Fredericks describes here a theme linking all the papers in this journal. In using arts as a self and group expression, arts become *artefacts of activism* my term for a range of activist promotions such as posters, street stencils, flash mobs, t-shirt designs and other forms which both stimulate and reflect change. Here activists use creative hooks to engage where there is apathy, to invite reflexivity where there is none, to begin to bridge the divides in our society.

Act Two in this journal focuses upon ... "*those groups whose members experience marginalization*". David Moxley asks: "*What is the potential of the arts for Action Learning?*" For Moxley the arts provide a platform for co-creating curriculum.

Is this what the participants of *What was that you said?* and *Long Way Home* were doing, developing a curriculum for life communication? Art provides a more palatable way for society to make visible, translate and consider our shadows. The cast of *Long Way Home* were keen to spark off on-going discussions with Australians who had not been to war.

Moxley considers that the "*Arts can deploy images that capture the plight people suffer.*" Not only images, but stories, traumatic triggers, body imprints and sounds.

To sit in an audience including military people and their families, was to feel the immense power of the horror of the experience of the 'theatre' of Afghanistan and to know the madness of trying to fit the hugeness and alienation of that horror into our irreverent, commercial ever-busy everyday life in Oz. Here live theatre reached across the foot lights, enveloping the audience in the lived experience of our military men and women, then brought them 'home'. As an active learner in the theatre experience, I am an active witness, a validator and can further analyse the story through critique and dissent. Invoking Kolb (1984), I experience

learning I would never have known about – yes it could be argued it is vicarious experience but what can't be taken away is the visceral nature of that experience. The capacity audience of young men and women and military families along with the general public were deeply moved, silent and strong. The production included a range of research approaches to collect feedback, including respectful questioning of audience members after the show in the foyer and an email survey.

Moxley states that: *“through the arts, those groups and their members facing oppression or marginalization can build new capacities for support...”* Soldiers who played themselves re-imagined, took the horror and the magnitude of war onto the stage in an attempt to gain our understanding. All are participating in on-going Action Learning – to learn what works - from their extraordinary courage to reveal their vulnerabilities to us.

In projects reported in this journal and I expect readers' projects too, you may work as facilitating witnesses trying to weave a support web to create a safe space for exploring these shadows. We rely upon our ethics of Action Research and learning tools as supporting frameworks.

Moxley shows us how the arts build *“new forms of knowledge”*. I suggest that includes such Ways of Knowing expressed in dot paintings, body paintings, street stencil art, a hip hop song on YouTube... We apply multiple methods to triangulate, using different media to collect ways of knowing to identify multiple layers of meaning.

Moxley and Goff show poetry as a way to reveal to listeners/ readers a way of pushing our boundaries and offering a sense of *other*. In my town there is a homeless poet. At bus stops or on a bus, he invites people to buy a poem from him. Here is art as social enterprise. He gets some cash and the buyer gets an insight into his lived experience. He could go on-line and stay out of sight – but he wouldn't have all those conversations he invites.

Our third act is an invitation to co-create at conferences – those big talk fests that attract people with a range of intersecting

knowledges. Content packed conferences too often limit possibilities for sharing and ideas generation. Cathryn Lloyd reports upon her conference interventions / integrations with the purpose of building reflective learning communities at the last two ALARA conferences and three other conference settings. Her practice-led inquiry demonstrates the reflexivity that Action Researchers and Action Learners apply in their praxis – weaving together the doing and the theory of the work in our reflexive approach to continually strive for understanding about the work.

Lloyd asks what can she learn from delegates?

My aspiration is that a conference be a place where our bodies, hearts and minds are aroused and where we are inspired to take action. To me a conference should also be a place of surprise, a place to wonder out loud, to ask and explore ‘What is Possible’, a place to experiment, and take risks. (This publication)

Part of being an Action Learning/ Action Research practitioner is to look out for how practitioners design, implement and harvest their results. We ask: *what worked, what didn't work so well for some and what was learned?* Lloyd offers her facilitation approach to strengthen the inclusivity, creativity and connectedness of events for the delegates –you may recognise this as one reviewer did, as Appreciate Inquiry in action.

The fourth act plays out inside Bronwyn Fredericks' shoebox in which she respectfully honours her ancestor women. Like all good research, the findings are applicable across a wider canvas – and the methodology applied state wide for the Centenary of Queensland women's suffrage in 2005. The shoeboxes enabled women to:

...decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items that could speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears over the past 100 years. The shoebox activity was designed to encourage women to celebrate, research and record their everyday lives from various perspectives – including the political, social, cultural, environmental and family. (This publication)

Here we have practice-led Action Research that was iterative, opportunistic, and involved talking with the old people, finding out who knew things, who had something to offer and a collection of differing perspectives on relationships with “Country, history, each other and the community.”

Fredericks reflects upon her artistic practice, research and teaching focus; she reflects upon her flow of knowledge and the interdependency of her practice. She knows in her bones that central to her work is research, mindful practice, reflective practices and artistic practice. I’d love to be a fly crawling over her visual wall, watching how it all interconnects together throughout its iterative development. As she asserts “*Aboriginal women never have Aboriginality without womanhood.*” This is a way of being and knowing that is indivisible – as is the shoebox project offering multiple perspectives as art, craft, history, research and/or scholarly activity. It is in itself a form of inquiry –practice-led research and development – in microcosm.

The last act comes from your usual editor Susan Goff whose work I chose for the final act as a summary of many of the themes already visited where she considers: *the generative and catalytic powers of creative expressive arts in Action Research.*

Goff’s paper focuses on methodological literacy and considers ways of knowing revealed through creative expressive arts. She shows how artistic data collecting can provide a safer way for sensitive topics such as young people exposed to family violence. A poem, a piece of music or visual art can express pain in a way that is within the total control of the story owner (the artist). Other means of data collecting such as interviews with case managers, can provide the raw history needed for the research. Context and understanding is strengthened with Goff’s use of artistic methods.

Goff’s paper rounds up this edition by synthesising theory and practice using creative approaches to managing difficult knowledges. She details a range of examples of applying artistic methods to reveal other ways of knowing that contextualise the worlds of our research participants:

It is the creative arts in the Action Research of how to be, that enable us to encounter such departures from all that we are familiar with, bringing us into co-existence with our new family members. This is a very different way of knowing, and relating to knowing, taking form in a world of very different composition to anything that we can call on. In such moments of ontological incomprehensibility creative arts in Action Research are fundamental to our survival. (This publication)

As an audience member watching *Long Way Home*, my unknowing state was shifted to accommodate the ghosts of young men and women trying to find solid ground under their feet after they returned home. There is an art in presenting research that leaves audiences feeling deeply about new knowledge. Can we as researchers take the feeling and try to verbalise, analyse, synthesise it into something we and others can understand?

And what was the result for the participants? I met some of them at a panel discussion at Australia's Parliament House. The soldier/actors reported a strengthening of their own capacity to transition. One particularly wanted other men to know its OK to reach out for help.

[\(http://news.defence.gov.au/2014/04/12/curtain-comes-down-on-the-long-way-home/\)](http://news.defence.gov.au/2014/04/12/curtain-comes-down-on-the-long-way-home/)

A creative research date

Finally I offer a research task if you'd like to action it. Take your researcher and learner on a date to a gallery, maybe pause and look at a street stencil, really listen to a song, or go to the theatre (live or film). You might like to reflect upon the research that underpinned the artistic result. As an Action Research/ Action Learning practitioner you will have many ideas about how you might go about doing the preliminary research that led to the art you are experiencing. The experience may lead you to think about how you might use creative ways of exploring understanding in your next project.

Action Research, Action Learning and the arts in all media, can inform a wide range of fields of practice and offer multiple Ways of Knowing as this journal shouts out loud. Enjoy creating your next project.

Acknowledgments

In appreciation for the reflections and critical thinking provided by the reviewers of this editorial: Judy Lovell (Ninti One Ltd), Stefan Kaufman Honorary Associate, Monash University) and Susan Goff (CultureShift Pty Ltd).

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. Cambridge UK: Polity Press.
- Brown, V. and Harris, J. A. (2013). *The human capacity for transformational change – Harnessing the collective mind*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Horsfall, D., Bridgman, K., Camden Pratt, C., Kaufman Hall, V., Pinn, J. and Kiraly, E. (2007). "Playing creative edges: Performing research – Women out to lunch". In J. Higgs, A. Titchen, D. Horsfall and H. Armstrong. (Eds.) (2007). *Being critical and creative in qualitative research*. Sydney: Hamden Press
- Horsfall, D., Bridgman, K., Camden Pratt, C., Kaufman Hall, V. and Pinn, J. (2011). "Playing Creative Edges: Reflections from "Women out to Lunch" 5 Years on. In J. Higgs, A. Titchen, D. Horsfall and D. Bridges, (Eds.) (2011). *Creative spaces for qualitative researching: Living research*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning – experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Biography

Dr Virginia Kaufman Hall is a long-term Action Researcher and Action Learner applying her practice to research, community development, community arts and theatre. For the past 5 years she established and managed the Participatory Planning, Research and Evaluation panel for Australian Government Indigenous Affairs. She recently returned to her own practice where she uses creative arts for storytelling, inviting people together to tell stories and show their places, environmental, personal and political.

Contact details

Dr Virginia Kaufman Hall

vkhall@icloud.com