Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World: Reflections and Future Perspectives
Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, Lesley Wood and Bob Dick

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to reflect on a panel discussion about an edited book launched at the 2012 ALARA Conference in Sydney. The majority of authors participated in the launch discussion and presented the message of their chapters, exploring real action possibilities for future sustainable development in their particular fields. Here three of them provide a brief account of their reflections: Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt writes the introduction and conclusion of the article, and comments on the background and conceptual framework of the book and its importance for the future; Bob Dick focuses on ‘facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing “wicked” problems in an uncertain and complex world’; and Lesley Wood focuses on ‘action research for sustainable social transformation’. The overall message is that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) and facilitative action leadership are effective and proven methods for sustainable development in our turbulent world in the 21st century. Readers are encouraged to apply and enhance a similar action research process and method to their collaborative work.

Keywords: Participatory action learning and action research, PALAR, sustainable social transformation/change, facilitative action leadership, turbulent world, reflections on future
Introduction

No matter how valuable and important panel presentations and discussions at conferences, they are mostly presented only in oral form. Thus their useful insights are ephemeral, soon forgotten, and not accessible to people who might be interested in the topic but unable to attend the conference. There are, of course, exceptions, e.g., video recordings or transcriptions of oral presentations and discussions in conference proceedings, but more often than not these transcripts remain unpublished. Valuable learning opportunities are lost.

One such example is the engaging panel discussion before the launching of a new edited volume, *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) at the 2012 ALARA Conference in Sydney. After participating in the discussion, panel members agreed to capture the valuable opportunity to pass on insights by writing our reflections for an article in the next issue of the *ALAR Journal*. But most of the book’s authors were unable to meet the submission deadline. The lesson I learnt for the future as a convenor of a panel discussion was that I would request panel members to submit a written paper before or during the conference when they have done their work anyway and can easily produce a draft. But as I had failed to do so, we – the three authors of this article had the choice to abandon the idea or seek to publish as an article at least our three reflections. We decided on the latter move and recognised this as an opportunity for reflecting on our own contributions to the edited volume and offering to readers the following: from Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt as the book editor and co-author, explanations of and reflections on this introduction and conclusion of this article, and the background and conceptual framework of the book; from Bob Dick as an author of a book chapter, a focus on ‘facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing “wicked” problems in an uncertain and complex world’; and from Lesley Wood as the writer...
of the ‘Foreword’ to the book, the perspective of a reviewer and advocacy for ‘action research for sustainable social transformation’.

Background and Highlights of the Launched Book

The overarching topic of our panel discussion at the ALARA Conference (September 2012) was the title of a book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). This book was written by ALARA elders who have made a significant contribution to the field of action learning/action research for more than 20 years. The idea for this book was conceived after a symposium held at the last ALARA World Congress in Melbourne in 2010 with the theme: *Celebrating 20 Years of ALAR: Revisiting the Past for Present and Future*, for it was precisely 20 years since we had organised the ‘First World Congress’ of ALAR in Brisbane in 1990.

Sustainable development is an issue challenging us all as we move further into this increasingly turbulent twenty-first century. Therefore, most of the authors participated in this panel discussion and (1) briefly outlined the message of their chapters for the future, (2) explored real action possibilities for future sustainable development in their fields, and (3) joined with co-authors in the panel discussion, and with the audience in the debate and further exploration of these ideas, with practical applications in their own areas of action and development.

Some presentations by elders drew from their respective chapters in the book, while others complemented the book’s chapters and extended out the *Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* theme – conceptually and in practice – with a future perspective. They included explanations of how sustainable development can be achieved through:

1. A conceptual framework and new models of action research for sustainable development in a turbulent world through
collaborative action learning, participatory action research and democratic action leadership required for individuals, groups and whole organisations/communities to work together effectively (Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt).

2. Facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing “wicked” problems in an uncertain and complex world (Bob Dick).

3. Action research for sustainable social transformation (Lesley Wood).

4. Action research as an enabler of integrative thinking for sustainable innovation, learning and development in business (Shankar Sankaran with Saul Brown).

5. Self-directed learning and community development with a cascade effect into other communities (Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt with Judith Kearney).


7. A global epistemological transformation of what counts as educational knowledge, with a focus on improving practice and generating “living theories” of our own learning, the learning of others, and community and organisational learning at work (Jack Whitehead on video).

8. Deepening levels of authentic collaboration – a central feature of effectiveness and sustainability (Eileen Piggot-Irvine on video).

The three contributions that could be included in this article comprise a small part of the panel discussion. But the lines of enquiry that the three pursue offer rich conceptual and practical insights. Unto themselves, and when melded together in this article, they both open up and weave together new possibilities for action research for sustainable development, problem solving and
social transformation in our ever more complex contemporary world. The first contributor presents the conceptual framework.

**Conceptual Framework of ‘Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World’**

In today’s ‘turbulent’ world, overpopulation, climate change, intensity of natural disasters, peak oil, nuclear energy concerns, and other issues that raise concern about the future of humankind on earth, have projected ‘sustainability’ into common conversation. Awareness has been heightened that achieving outcomes is one thing, and sustainability – capacity to maintain the outcome – is quite another and is even more important, certainly for continued wellbeing. In this new paradigm and theoretical framework, the following concepts are important and need discussion:

- Action research (AR)
- Sustainable development (SD)
- Turbulent world
- AR for SD in a turbulent world
- Action leadership

**Action Research (AR)**

There are as many definitions of AR as there are AR advocates. So we leave the task to you, the reader, to reflect on and continue to develop your own definition and interpretation of AR and its various derivatives and cousins (cf. the main works in the literature) including:

- *AL – Action learning* (Dilworth & Boshyk, 2010; McGill & Brockbank, 2004; Donnenberg, 1999; Marquardt, 1999; Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Pedler, 1997; 2008; Mumford, 1997; Revans, 1982; 1991)
ALAR – the integration of action learning and action research (Sankaran, Dick, Passfield & Swepson, 2001; Speedy, 2003; Zuber-Skerritt, 2009)

PAR – participatory action research (Fals Borda, 1998; 2001; Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; McIntyre, 2008)

Action science (Argyris, Putman & Smith, 1985; Aryris & Schön, 1989; Raelin, 1997)

AI – appreciative enquiry (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010; Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999; Cooperrider, Whitney, Stavros & Jacqueline, 2008; Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2008; Reed, 2007)

PALAR – the integration of participatory action learning and action research as action leadership (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; 2012).

Sustainable Development (SD)

As with AR, there are many definitions of SD, but the most frequently quoted definition is from the so-called Brundtland Report produced by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987): “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (http://www.worldbank.org/depweb/english/sd.html). The Report called for greater international cooperation to improve global environmental, economic and social sustainability; and it stressed that environmental problems are closely tied to problems of economic and social inequality.

Approaching development in a sustainable way means meeting the needs of current and future generations by balancing the three major target dimensions: economic efficiency, social justice and environmental responsibility. These three areas of concern – economy, society and environment – have frequently been
illustrated in various models/schemes of sustainable development at the confluence of the three constituent parts, as suggested here in Figure 1.¹

![Figure 1 Main dimensions of sustainable development](image)

None of the three dimensions in Figure 1 can be achieved at the expense of any other; they are all equally important. For example, economic development can be sustained only if there are healthy ecosystems and well-trained people. The goals and results of combined (1) economic development and social justice should be *equitable* (although this could also apply to economic development, e.g., equal access to potable water, clean air, food, health services and education); (2) social justice and environmental responsibility should be *natural*, i.e., adhering to universal laws of nature and

¹ Reproduced here from the original source (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012, p. 209) with kind permission of the publishers (Emerald, UK).
humanity in a balance of governance through government and citizen initiative; and (3) environmental responsibility and economic development should be viable for both (environmental responsibility and economic development) and for all.

Turbulent World

Today’s turbulent world is characterised by an increase in:

- Natural and human-induced disasters: floods, droughts, hurricanes, tornados, tsunamis, bushfires, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, rising sea levels, etc.;
- Overpopulation, involuntary population migration;
- Militarisation and its expression in war;
- Global financial crises – and more generally, as Bob Dick argues in his contribution to this article:
- Globalisation;
- Growth in technology and artificial intelligence; and
- Communication technologies and the Internet.


Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World

The democratic values of collaboration and participation continue to be vital principles of action research for sustainable development in this turbulent world. But how can this be achieved?

As I stated earlier (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011):

We need to explore further possibilities for ‘true democracy’ through active participation. We need to
create multiple relationships locally and globally with social spaces where we can engage with, and come to value and respect, one another and the group as a whole despite our differences in culture, religion, race, class, sexual orientation, age, life experience, endowment and world view. I argue that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) presents effective ways to achieve such outcomes. I also argue that creating a synergy between ancient (e.g., Greek and Indigenous) and contemporary dialogue and practices provides great potential for enabling us in the 21st century to share our collective wisdom in the interest of the collective ‘good’. (p. 4)

With reference to Figure 2, **democratic values**, openness and respect for different beliefs and worldviews can lead to **wisdom**, especially if based on a balanced integration of history, present conditions and future vision. This wisdom must be extended to **creativity and innovation** in order to achieve the reformation and transformation of the **status quo** into a new global society that is tolerant, democratic, loving, sharing and caring – a society that is sensitised to the philosophies of non-government organisations (NGOs), to the politics of uniting nations, to the fair and equitable distribution of wealth, and to responsible environmental management. Action research is central in this conceptual framework as shown in Figure 2.²

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² See footnote 1 (p. 190).
Transformation takes place in the global society through transformed individuals, groups and activists (or action leaders) “when they agree to work together to make their own social practices more just, rational, coherent, sustainable and satisfying for all those involved and affected” (McTaggart, 2012, p. 107).

**Action leadership**

In my recent book (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) I argued that the present time of radical change calls for profound rethinking of ways to improve how people and organisations learn, and thus their capacity to engage critically and constructively with the complex issues challenging society at all levels. I suggested that:

… action leadership is a solution to the increasing neo-liberalism in the form of bureaucratization, managerial control and normative regulation systems in many organizations and governments around the world. It is a
hope for a humanist renaissance or revolution of people power and self-directed actualization of a just and equal society in a global community; and a more effective, sustainable, better world for future generations than a world of competition, rationality, control, technical efficiency (rather than effectiveness) and managerialism. This managerialism upholds the belief in, or reliance on, the use of professional managers in administering a nation, an organization or section thereof and the belief that organizations have more similarities than differences and can be optimized by the application of generic management skills and theory. Action leadership does not rely on such managerialism, but is more flexible, responsive to change, and innovative in solving problems. Action leaders are experienced, wise and other-centred rather than self-centred. (p. 231)

Action leadership is conceived as primus inter pares (first among equals) emerging from group collaboration, using PALAR and coaching for leadership development. It is a creative, innovative, collaborative and self-developed way to lead, based on the democratic values of freedom, equality, inclusion and self-realisation. It takes responsibility for, not control over, people through networking and fostering human energy and self-confidence towards a holistic outcome that benefits the common interest.

Bob Dick calls this type of leadership ‘facilitative action leadership’ as he explains in the next section.

Facilitative Action Leadership and More Flexible Approaches to Addressing “Wicked” Problems in an Uncertain and Complex World

Two trends are acting to increase the turbulence in the world, with a third trend emerging from their conjunction. These trends are set
to create an environment that favours action research as a methodology and mindset, and facilitative leadership as a preferred leadership style.

The first trend is the continuing growth in technology and artificial intelligence. I have in my pocket at the moment a smart phone, actually a small computer. Half a century ago, a computer with far less computing power would occupy a large room. Another room would be required for its air conditioning. Growth in computing power is expected to continue. Some forecasts predict that by mid-century, artificial intelligence will exceed human intelligence. The IBM super-computer Deep Blue has already defeated the Russian chess master Garry Kasparov.

Globalisation is the second trend. With the entire globe as market, we are increasingly affected by events elsewhere. International corporations, with almost no global governance to constrain them, can reach out to influence governments and depose presidents and prime ministers.

At the intersection of these two trends sit communication technologies and their foster child the Internet. I can conduct a real-time conversation with a group of people scattered across most of the globe's continents. People, everywhere, are potentially interconnected. Their influence and shared leadership, though still mostly latent, can now begin to counter the power of governments and of corporations.

In the past, bureaucratic structures operated efficiently, or efficiently enough. Traditional research methods, with randomised control trials as the exemplar, accumulated knowledge very effectively. Technology advanced, bureaucracy prospered, globalisation occurred, and the Internet grew. Command and control leadership was common because – among other reasons – it worked most of the time. These approaches thrive on stability. Now times are changing. As turbulence increases they function less well unless complemented by other approaches.
It is not that a previously stable world has suddenly become unstable. Times of relative stability have always been punctuated by times of change. There have always been complex situations in which traditional methods lose some of their effectiveness. People adapt such methods so they continue to function by finding ways of stabilising the situation or deflecting the instability elsewhere.

For example, at all levels most education is traditional. It functions by maintaining control, regimenting behaviour and controlling idiosyncrasy. Yet every class is to some extent unique, as is every person in it. When I became an academic, being responsive to that uniqueness required me to enter into a partnership with class members. I used my initial leadership to facilitate shared leadership by all of us. We designed and managed the class collaboratively. Treading new ground, we used intelligent trial and error to proceed. In other words, we practised action research. There was much about action research that served us well. Its collaborative nature fitted our partnership. It allowed us to respond flexibly to the unexpected. By integrating research and action it supported our understanding and our achievements.

There will continue to be situations in which traditional approaches work well. Some research situations will continue to suit fully experimental methods. In some organisational environments bureaucracy will be the appropriate structure. Command and control styles of leadership will still sometimes be indicated.

There are growing numbers of situations, however, where turbulence is more common than stability. Increasingly there will be complex situations where almost everything affects almost everything else, and causal assumptions will fail. Action research and its facilitative leadership style will then offer effective and satisfying ways of proceeding.
Bob Dick’s sentiment and hope are reiterated by Lesley Wood in the next section. Invited to comment on the book, Lesley draws attention to the book’s contribution to sustainable social transformation, and the inclusional philosophy that the book embodies. Here she chooses to highlight some of the most important messages of hope that have implications for researchers who wish to contribute to sustainable social transformation.

**Action Research for Social Transformation**

Although we are at the mercy of greater environmental, political and economic forces; although life is unpredictable, unjust, unequal, and unpleasant for the majority of people in the world, we, as researchers, can contribute to social change and improvement through employing participatory action learning methodologies. My own context is in education in a country where the very systems that are supposed to help develop education are characterised by inefficiency, corruption, mishandling of budgets and general failure in the area of service delivery. However, action research enables us to work with communities to mobilise them to harness their transformative potential and become agents of their own social change. As Norbert Platz emphatically states in his review of the book, “We need not be victims”; action research provides us with tools to work collaboratively with even the most marginalised of communities.

The dialogical forms of logic that underpin action research lead us to accept that we can succeed only if we work with and learn from others. Action research places people at the centre of any enquiry and thus constrains us to embody values such as respect for diversity, person-centredness and compassion for our fellow human beings. Values that promote the social good can thus be transformed from rhetoric to reality, if we hold them up as ‘living standards of judgement’ (Whitehead, 1989) to validate our research. Furthermore, the critical, emancipatory paradigm that informs the ontology and epistemology of action research unleashes the
capacity of people to think critically about how they can free themselves from dominating forces and forge their own identities as agents of change in the interests of society. History has taught many of us that the preservation of hard boundaries between philosophies, religions and races causes unending strife. The relational, dialogical thinking underpinning action research allows us to blur distinct borders and find points of agreement and compromise that can promote harmony and collaboration.

This book embodies the inclusive philosophy of action research. In many instances action research has been divided into camps – for example, values based self-study approach versus an outsider, researcher as facilitator approach of participatory action research. The different understandings of AR have been melded together here by the idea of sustainability. The epistemology, ontology and axiology of all forms of action research are similar – they all aim to transform society through transforming individuals and communities. As action learning is foregrounded as part of action research, the individual learning of action leaders becomes central to the process of change – the ‘I’ is thus becoming an integral part of any action research genre, and this is what makes change more likely to be sustainable. The transformative potential of people holding themselves accountable, through critical self-reflection, for how their learning and actions affect their spheres of influence, is infinite – the accumulative effect of personal commitment to lifelong learning makes sustainable improvement inevitable.

This book is a scholarly contribution by renowned scholars and fills a gap in the literature at a particularly timely moment. It places AR as a vehicle for exploring and improving problems that beset this socially, economically and ecologically threatened world. The ‘golden thread’ of commitment to quality-of-life enhancing values, authentic participation, and people-centredness illustrates the flexibility, resilience and adaptability of AR to transverse disciplinary boundaries. As Mary Brydon-Millar says, it offers both generative theoretical frameworks and concrete strategies for using
AR. It contributes to the humanising of research, something that is much needed in today’s world where traditional aspects of community and caring have been eroded.

**Conclusion**

The primary aim of this article has been to reflect on and discuss aspects of the book *Action Research for Sustainable Development in a Turbulent World* and to bring new insights from the panel discussion at the 2012 ALARA Conference into published form to enhance their capacity to contribute to knowledge creation. Each co-author has focused on a specific area/topic: Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt on the conceptual framework of the book and article; Bob Dick on ‘facilitative action leadership and more flexible approaches to addressing “wicked” problems in an uncertain and complex world’; and Lesley Wood on ‘action research for sustainable social transformation’. The overall message of this article is that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) and facilitative action leadership are effective and proven methods for sustainable development in our turbulent world in the 21st century.

Although all three co-authors have substantial experience and evidence for this message, the scope of the article has limited us to producing a conceptual, rather than a research paper. In concluding this paper we recognise as useful a few examples from a South African leadership development program on community engagement that can be summarised by “PALAR works!”, as one participant cheered. Program participants offered many accounts of how “PALAR has become a way of life” for them. To quote a few:

- “PALAR has provided me with a way of making my engagement with the community human”;  
- “A vibrant community of practice has emerged”;  
- “The PALAR process results in a high degree of personal growth”; and
• “A high level of motivation and enthusiasm”.

Other researchers and practitioners are encouraged to test our ideas in their own environment to further develop knowledge for their own needs and purposes. In this way we work together to reap the benefits for, and social transformation of, local communities and organisations. Such creation and passage of knowledge works towards the type of sustainable development so urgently needed in our turbulent world of the twenty-first century.

References


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