Chapter 10: Conclusion

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In this final chapter of the book we begin by offering our own consideration of significant developments emergent from the ESAR. We then draw together the key findings from the ESAR. Next, we consider what our findings signal to us about the future for AR and then share our final reflections about our journey.

Significant developments emerging from the ESAR

We believe that several ideas, tools and models have emerged from the ESAR which may add value to the work of both action researchers and those in the evaluation field more broadly. These developments involved a number of 'firsts' including: a modelling of AR collaborative process at a 'meta' level; a set of AR evaluation indicators; development of an AR evaluation model; employment of the GAS tool within the AR context; re-creation of a Maturity Model into a Maturity Profile more suitable to the flexible AR context; and an overall comment on new evaluation findings. Each of these 'firsts' is discussed in the next sections.

Modelling AR collaborative process at a 'meta' level

As we have reported in many places in this book, AR strives for an authentic, non-defensive, collaborative process to be implemented as an integrated component of research. Although such an approach is widely documented in individual AR projects, we have found no other example of dedication to these collaboration principles at the meta-level of evaluation conducted in the ESAR (i.e., across multiple projects).

In our discussion of networks and collaboration in Chapter 3, we dug more deeply into the way we collaborated and also strived to be honest in our sharing of the normality of ups and downs associated with that collaboration. We hope that our honesty and reflections provide some level of modelling to others who might consider embarking on the sort of journey we have engaged in.

Evaluation indicator development and employment

In Chapter 2 we outlined the construction and categorisation of indicator domains for our study. These indicators are another first. There were no other AR evaluation indicators of this extent prior to the ESAR. The indicators guided us in the measurement of inputs, outputs and outcomes of AR projects. The AR indicators framework was created in the spirit of a true AR process, employing principles of past knowledge from the field (a type of reconnaissance activity), and collaborative involvement of the full research team. We also actively sought further critique from the scholarly community to refine the framework.

The indicator framework has proven to be exceptionally useful (although not perfect) for capturing and organising key activities in the study projects as: 1) precursors/foundation; 2) key processes/activities; 3) AR outcomes; and 4) AR impacts. We offer that the first category – precursors/foundation (i.e., preparatory elements needed to launch an initiative) – is not so commonly identified and discussed in projects. We have often experienced that good faith and intentions seem to be more the standard than the substantial planning, focusing, support

gathering that is necessary. Our inclusion of those early AR activities in the evaluation indicators generated useful findings linked to subsequent successes in projects.

Our explicitness in the indicator framework in articulating different kinds of activity outputs (e.g., people engaged, reports generated) as well as outcomes (changes that have occurred in knowledge, behaviours, attitudes, systems and policies, etc) also generated a richness in data that we had not experienced before in our reporting of AR activity. A similar result was associated with specificity linked to the indicators in the fourth domain. This involved AR impacts associated with larger and longer term changes that might occur in an organisation or a community as a accumulative result of all activities, processes, outputs and outcomes.

Development of an AR evaluation model

The flexible, yet rigorous EvAR framework, our roadmap developed for the entire study, is new to both the fields of AR and evaluation. The design of the EvAR was based on an AR cyclical approach with highly reflective and reflexive elements. It enabled authentic collaboration and engagement to enhance ownership from the ESAR team and the AR project participants we were evaluating.

The GAS tool

GAS has not featured as a data collection tool in AR generally, yet it has utility at both individual and collective project evaluation levels for AR. We believe our publication of the GAS results for evaluation is another first for AR. In the ESAR, GAS was found to be a meaningful way to evaluate process, improvement, and gains of the multiple projects involved. Overall, GAS was offered as a tool with the potential to broaden action and deepen the research endeavour by enhancing the systemic thinking that is not so much an approach to undertaking AR, but is a grounding *for* AR (Flood 2010).

Extension of the Maturity Model

In the ESAR a new non-linear, more flexible, Maturity Profile rather than Model was developed to assist AR project management and systemic understanding. Our collaborative approach with action researchers and systems thinkers in the development of the profile at conference workshops in South Africa, Australia, and the United States is a further example of the way in which we, as an ESAR team, constantly reflected on how we might enhance AR evaluation.

New thinking about AR based on rigorous findings

Throughout this book we have noted new evaluation findings from the ESAR. Many of those findings are a 'first' and extensive enough to be summarised in the following subsection.

Key findings from the ESAR

We were deeply interested in revealing what worked or not, what resulted in impacts and outcomes in AR, and whether there was any correlation between factors. We have examined the results to reveal such factors, and below have categorised those under 'Present in all or

nearly all AR projects', and 'Elements that were lacking or limited'. We have employed our indicator domains of 'precursors, processes, outcomes and impacts' for more detailed categorisation. Note that, in the lists below, we have stated the indicator element first in each bullet point, followed by summarised results from the case studies (which included the 'long survey', GAS, interviews, documentary analysis) and the 'short survey' MM results from the widespread survey with 174 respondents.

Factors present in all or nearly all AR projects

Precursors:
- Creation of a core project team: all case study and the majority of short survey respondent projects established a core team.
- A need/concern or vision created early in the project: all case projects had a clear focus mostly on improvement, change and development intent – in three cases the focus was developed early, in three it was emergent as the project progressed; nearly one-third of the survey participants indicated early that they sought 'transformational' change, in which change to the current state was desired, but the end-state was unknown at the onset of the project.
- An AR approach and overview plan: all case study respondents implied they followed an AR approach, with three cases noting adopting an 'emergent' development of that; 96.7% of short survey respondents agreed that they had developed and articulated an AR approach and overview plan in the early stages.
- Processes established to acquire financial, technical and human resources: all case studies established this; short survey respondents (71.2%) agreed that their project was sufficiently funded but whether securing funding, or other resources, occurred as a precursor was not so strongly stated.
- Early identification and connection with stakeholders/boundary partners: evident in 5/6 case studies.
- Establishment of desired outcomes or impacts in consultation with their project communities: clear evidence in 5/6 case studies; stated in short survey response (76.6%).
- Creation of processes and protocols for project team (including stakeholders) to work together collaboratively and democratically (e.g., with shared decision making): in 5/6 case studies discussion of processes occurred; the majority of short survey respondents (86.1%) supported this, though several comments identified that early dealing with conflict had also occurred.

Processes:
- Strong leadership/management of the AR process: evident in all but one case study; implied across multiple short survey results.
- A structure of coherence and scaffolding of processes and phases for the AR project: Evident in 5/6 case studies, in the GAS results most respondents scored positive outcomes (+1, +2) for having AR project phases; 96.1% of short survey respondents agreed that their AR project adhered to AR phases.
- Flexibility and responsiveness (adaptiveness) were critical features of the projects: stated as valued in all case studies; 93.3% of short survey respondents agreed.
- Use of rigorous methods for data collection: reported by case respondents, with evidence of use of MM emerging; in the short survey, 95.5% agreed.

- Ongoing implementation of strong collaborative and democratic processes: evident in all case studies; 76.6% of short survey respondents also agreed that AR desired outcomes or inputs were developed in consultation with the wider community.

Outcomes and Impacts:
- AR project resulted in changes in outcomes overall: 85.7% of short survey participants.
- Outcomes of participant and stakeholder change in perspective and knowledge, attitude and skills: 88.1% of short survey respondents agreed.
- Knowledge mobilisation/transfer of information and reports towards the end of the project: most short survey respondents (87.1%) agreed; a correlation was also found ($r = 0.523$) between sharing knowledge and realising change outcomes.
- Creation or expansion of networks: 73.6% short survey participants agreed.
- Increased commitment to change-related goals: 77.4% short survey respondents agreed.
  - Evidence of positive feedback from those impacted, and implementation of actions to create change: extensive evidence of positive feedback; in short survey results a reasonable association ($r = 0.540$) was shown between the implementation of actions to create or contribute to change and positive feedback from those impacted.

Elements that were lacking or limited or slightly conflictual across many projects

Precursors:
- Project was embedded in a sustainable system of resources: Not always strongly stated.

Processes:
- Employment of rigorous data analysis methods: In the short survey, whereas 95.5% agreed with using rigorous data collection methods, slightly less at 86.5% agreed to using rigorous data analysis.
- Processes to assess progress and refresh the mandate or project goals/objectives: not strongly evident.
- Collaboration, engagement, with research participants/stakeholders: whilst reported as a strong feature of many projects, this element was often also reported as a limiting factor. Qualitative responses highlighted concerns regarding apathy, partial engagement, limited resources or access issues that impeded the ability to democratically engage those impacted by the project.
- Evidence of evaluation processes for project: mixed results in case studies, including GAS; short survey results did not identify this strongly either.
- Self-review or monitoring of AR phase activity by the core team: not noted in case studies or in survey results.

The results overall led us to articulate a 'thumbs up' conclusion for the state of AR project precursors, processes, outcomes and impacts. Our findings showed cohesiveness among AR practitioners about how they prepare for and undergo AR research, with high adherence to AR methodology principles. At the same time, our respondents made it clear that along with adherence they appreciated the unpredictability, contextual and cultural specificity of AR. As we have stated earlier in the book that flexibility (a feature valued by many including Wicks, Reason, and Bradbury 2008) has a consequence of non-generalisable findings.

Our examination of all data to determine the type of change associated with AR projects, led us to conclude that such change was extensive but often still evolving. What was clear is that the type of change, whether short term or evolving, was highly diverse and included network creation, increased commitment, skill development, positive feedback, implementation of actions, clarification of next steps, behavioural changes, changes in policies, and changes in relations between groups including interactions and dialogue between stakeholder groups. These ESAR results affirmed Lewin's (1946) early intentions for AR to empower change and align with Meyer's (2000) comment that: 'success of action research is not whether change can be positively demonstrated, but more what was learnt from the experience of trying to change practice' (p. 9).

Findings worthy of comment

There were some interesting findings worthy of final comment. The first covers data collection. Results indicating rigorous data collection may signal a shift in thinking which we have also noticed informally. Recently, we have experienced considerable uptake of employment of MMAR subsequent to the increasing literature on this topic from the likes of Ivankova (2015). The ESAR results indicate an element of this uptake. However, in the ESAR we were also interested to see a slight reduction in respondents noting rigorous analysis rather than the collection of data. Further, we report that the evaluation, self-monitoring and review activities of AR projects in the ESAR were not strongly indicated.

The second interesting finding worthy of comment is that there is ***no particular recipe for success.*** We have made a particular point in recording that the correlation data in the MM short survey did not support any conclusive results linking precursors or processes to specific outcomes or impacts. In other words, it is not possible to infer causality linked to particular AR ingredients resulting in an AR recipe for success.

Threads throughout our data

We conclude our discussion of 'findings' with mention of two key elements that emerged as threads through all of our data. The first is that of leadership and the second collaboration.

Leadership was indicated as an important element in the ESAR findings and this is elaborated in Chapter 9. Specifically, it was found that leadership was more collaborative than hierarchical though evidence existed that a single key person leading was pivotal to enhancing processes, outcomes and impacts of the AR projects. These findings contribute to the growing conversation about shared, collective and relational approaches to leadership situated within AR systems.

Collaboration was reported by the study participants as critical from early planning phase to dissemination of findings, although it evolved and expressed itself in many different ways. Schruijar (2006), Piggot-Irvine (2012), Dick (2001) and many others describe varied dimensions of collaboration, including that of ensuring democratic, equitable, voices and representation (see Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 1996). Several dimensions that were evident in AR projects in the ESAR included: having a common goal and desired outcomes developed both within the project team and with stakeholders; multiple people involved in jointly problem solving and decision making; multi-group engagement in completing the project work tasks; actions taken to maintain momentum of diverse groups; attention to developing democratic processes, trust building and strategies to address conflicts

early; bi- and multi-lateral agreements and coalitions to cope with system complexity; establishing systems for sharing knowledge generated; and finally a strong leader to coordinate the different perspectives and move a group forward to a decision that everyone can agree with. In the intensive case studies comments about limitations associated with collaboration were insightful. Lack of collaboration was one of the most frequently mentioned topics as interfering with progress, engagement of the community or ultimate success for some of the projects.

Limitations of the ESAR and suggestions for further research

In several chapters of this book there is a 'limitations' section. Overall, we acknowledge the comment by Meyer (2000) that the process and/or findings from evaluation of AR are potentially contentious and open to challenge given the emphasis placed on the open-ended, emergent, quality that is valued in AR. We experienced that challenge in a conference during a minor clarification exercise at one point in this study and were asked about the appropriateness of using the same criteria as traditional research for evaluation. As noted earlier in the book, we took that challenge on board and strived to be inclusive of broad and largely qualitative criteria for evaluation, to respect the emergent qualities of AR, and attempted to model the democratic values and principles in our own ESAR process by employing a newly developed AR-based evaluative framework. We also note that our sampling reach was limited to the extended network of the ESAR team and success in locating qualified AR projects in relevant AR journals. That reach enabled us to locate over 600 projects, so it is not a considerable limitation.

We have reported on the Penfield et al. (2014) limitations associated with frameworks such as the EvAR. These include the fact that time lags, developmental changes, difficulties with specifically attributing inputs to outputs, knowledge creep, and issues linked to gathering data retrospectively can occur with impacts and outcomes. This made it difficult to trace those back to a project. We have openly acknowledged that our retrospective evaluation may have been influenced by such factors.

A limitation could be seen to exist with our small number of case studies – six overall, but only five responded in the GAS data collection. As we have noted in the GAS results paper, while there was a degree of diversity offered between the case studies, broader national, organisational, and cultural reach may have thrown up further insights. We believe that our employment of the MM short survey to a large number of projects beyond the case studies has assisted to extend those insights.

We specifically acknowledge a limitation to the generalisability of any conclusions drawn from the ESAR short survey. Generalisability is a feature often strived for in evaluation studies. We did not develop specific project-related change indicators and had no intention of drawing generalized conclusions and/or predictive cause/effect statements of what makes for a successful AR project.

There are multiple ways that the ESAR could be extended for further research. Extension of the number and diversity of case studies could be explored. Refinement of the EvAR, the ESAR indicators, the survey tools, are all areas for potential extension. We have also offered that the potential of the use of GAS as a dialogue tool for evaluation *within* AR projects could be explored.

What our findings signal to us about the future for AR

We believe that AR is needed now more than ever as *a way* to positively impact individual, community, organisational, and societal change. In particular, collaborative and partnership philosophies have come to the foreground as a way of responding to the global pandemic in 2020, Covid-19. AR embodies those philosophies and though not explicitly identified as such has been enacted as a process throughout the pandemic. From a collaborative approach to developing a global vaccine, to health systems, governments (provincial, national and international) and private business sharing information and working solutions together - partnership and collaboration has been evident as a critical thread within countries that have led a positive response to this crisis. Moreover, in those countries, researchers (e.g., University faculty) have also played an important role in the advice and guidance to governments and decision makers regarding the response to the crisis in a fast-moving environment. Further, as we have sought to re-boot industry sectors hard hit by shut-downs, collaborative solution hunting for systemic change has been needed.

The ESAR, grounded in collaborative philosophy, has established and to some degree tested a framework that can be used to both design and evaluate AR. We hope that AR participants will find the overall EvAR and findings useful for guidance in their projects. Reviewers, examiners, or funders also might use the indicator framework to consider how a project addresses each of the elements. In this way the ESAR offers ideas to enhance the way AR is undertaken so that AR outcomes and impacts may produce even greater value.

Our reflections at the end of our journey

Lesley (team member): *A final standout reflection for me about my ESAR journey is the connections and relationships I have built with others who also highly value the philosophies that underpin AR. As one of our articles illustrated, networks are often a by-product of AR projects. Yet the network I have developed because of my ESAR journey has been central to my journey. Working with and hearing about other AR experiences as we sought to capture the essence of what makes AR so impactful has strengthened my confidence and resolve to pursue AR as my primary approach to research. It has also given me a renewed sense of courage to promote AR as a way of engaging in important social change and to encourage students who show an affinity with AR philosophies to take on the challenge of AR as a powerful way to enable their contribution to a better world.*

Wendy (team member): *Participating in the ESAR study was a very rewarding and exciting initiative for me because it gave me the opportunity to collaborate with fellow researchers who had the same passion – to know whether AR, in all its wonderful principles and processes, makes a difference. I have long been a scholar practitioner who sought to engage in the real world with community groups and organisations through application of theory and research to practical problems, issues or opportunities. Making a difference and being relevant to those in the field attempting to address serious social problems, seems to me to be a critical compelling reason to engage in scholarship and knowledge dissemination. For the most part, you are seen as a strange thinker by the practitioner field and not really a scholar by the academic community; your questions, methods and findings seen as somewhat suspect or not quite valid. With the ESAR, I was blessed to be able to work with a group of colleagues from around the world who appreciated the complexity of AR and who dared to undertake this initiative with little financial support and uncertainty at times. My invitation to the ESAR team came from Eileen, a New Zealander, who I met at a Canadian Evaluation Society conference in 2010. When she was came to Royal Roads University in early 2012 as a faculty member in the School of Leadership, I was thrilled to have access to her brilliant mind and wealth of*

experience, and to partner with her on AR writing. She introduced me to her AR colleagues and my more limited world of scholarship in AR research in Canada and United States exploded to include the ideas of groups like ALARA in Australia and New Zealand. It has truly been an enlightening and rewarding journey.

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