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## Building Purposeful Action: action methods and action research

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**ABSTRACT** Examination of a piece of psychodramatic work indicates there are similarities, as well as differences between action methods (AM) and action research (AR). It appears that connections between AR and AM could be strengthened for mutual benefit. The article builds on this and introduces AM to action researchers and proposes some ways AM could be used in AR. These include AM's focus on building the spontaneity and creativity of groups in the here and now, the systemic portrayal of situations with the ability for efficient and dynamic iterations of the action research cycle, and the integration of the individual within themselves (thoughts, feelings and action), while at the same time engaging with others.

### Introduction

When hunters returned and re-enacted a hunt, the tribe could celebrate and honour the hunters and the hunted. When the shaman used physical things to be the different forces impacting on an individual in physical and spiritual emergency, then the whole group could be involved in a transformative and healing process. In countless ways over the ages unscripted dramatic enactment has been used by groups to generate and communicate experience and meaning, foster intimacy, and provide healing and learning (Fox, 1994; Barbour, 1995).

Jacob Moreno (1946) drew on this tradition and the creativity of children's role playing and formulated a *theatre of spontaneity*. He saw it as the best way to assist people to reach the spontaneous being state needed for creativity. He wanted people to have a love affair with the process of creating not just the products of creativity. Throughout the twentieth century Moreno (1946, 1953) and others, most notably Zerka Moreno (1969, 1987) and Max Clayton (1994), developed psychodrama, sociometry, role training, and various constructs and techniques. These have been applied in various groups for purposes of personal growth and organisational change

and development. 'Psychodrama' and 'action methods' (AM) are used as umbrella terms and will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

What then might be the connections and overlaps of AM with Action Research (AR)? An initial examination of this is done in the first part of this article through the presentation and discussion of a piece of AM work (vignette). The second part of the article builds on this and introduces AM to action researchers and proposes some ways AM could be used in AR.

### **The Computer Salesman Vignette**

The following piece of group interaction was one of many pieces of work done by myself in the area of people's interaction with the computing world. The work, conducted over many years, has sought to understand the dynamics between computer users and the machine, its software applications, and the computer world of salespeople, designers and developers, and support people (Carter, 2002a). This has been done in a variety of settings from homes and small medium enterprises to large organisations. The main goal has been to devise and implement interventions so that computer users' work and life purposes are progressed. The work has also generated greater insight into the systemic nature of the human-computer dynamics and provided a number of recommendations to computing professionals (Carter, 2002b).

The following description of a group interaction serves as a demonstration of psychodramatic practice introducing several of the theoretical constructs and perspectives of the psychodrama director. Comprehensive descriptions of psychodramatic theory cannot be covered in this article. Interested readers can attempt the stream of consciousness writings of Moreno (1946, 1953) or the more contemporary work of Blatner (2000), Holmes et al (1994), and Kellermann (1992). The writings of Max Clayton (1992, 1993, 1994) are particularly valuable because he is a highly regarded trainer who has built theory over decades of practice, and conceptualised it in a clear and lively way.

As you enter into the following group interaction, I invite you to see connections and parallels with AR and your own work. A comparison will be made after the vignette and parts of the following vignette will also be used in the section suggesting ways AM might be used successfully in AR.

A group of six people have met to practise psychodrama and are seated in a semicircle. There has been a group interaction during which a protagonist (Clare) has been chosen as she carries a concern of the group. So far the group leader (director) has assisted Clare to layout the initiating scene. This consists of herself, a salesman and a pile of devices (fax machine, microwave oven, a computer and a cellphone which are represented by cushions). The salesman starts the scene so Clare is the salesman and the person chosen (auxiliary) to be the salesman is Clare (in the role of Clare). Note. This first bit is a little difficult to visualise, but once you've got it, the rest should be a lot easier:

*Director: [Talking to Clare who is the salesman] Now warm up to being the salesman. Take on his physical posture and stand like him. Be him. And when you are him, say what you say to Clare [the role of Clare currently taken by the auxiliary].*

*Salesman: Look at these wonderful devices. They're modern and sophisticated machines. They make your life better, easier, more efficient.*

*Director: Reverse roles.*

Now that Clare has been the salesman, the auxiliary now knows what the salesman is like. After the role reversal, the auxiliary as salesman repeats the words, tone, and body language of what the protagonist just enacted. The protagonist has her behaviour as a salesman *mirrored* to her. The protagonist responds:

*Clare: I don't want them. I don't want them.*

*Director: Reverse roles.*

Same procedure as before, i.e. the protagonist becomes the salesman and the auxiliary becomes Clare, and the auxiliary re-enacts what the protagonist has just enacted. The protagonist now has her functioning as herself mirrored to her as she is in the position of salesman. She responds:

*Salesman: You're joking. They are the future. You need them to be part of the future.*

*Director: Reverse roles. [Same procedure as before; Clare and auxiliary reverse roles.]*

*Clare: I don't need them. I don't want them. I've done fine without them so far. [This is said with a whinging tone indicating relating with an external authority. Then the protagonist looks puzzled and says as an aside directed away from the salesman.] Maybe I do need them, I don't know.*

*Director: How about you come out here with me and we'll watch what you've enacted so far. Could someone be Clare? [The director requests the audience.]*

The director decides it will be useful for the protagonist to view her functioning from a new position and perspective. The director has noticed that, so far, the protagonist is confused, and unable to break out of a fixation with the salesman and hypothesises that from a different position the protagonist will come up with something new. So the director invites the protagonist to observe the entire enactment so far from a more distant perspective on the edge of the stage or action area. A group member has self-selected herself to be Clare:

*Director: Okay, you re-enact the whole scene from the beginning and we'll watch.*

The auxiliaries re-enact the scene from the beginning without interruption. Nearing the end of the re-enactment and talking to the director the protagonist says:

*Clare: Oh God, she's still caught up in it. But there's another me.*

*Director: Good. Where is that other you?*

*Clare: Over there. [The protagonist points to an empty area of the stage.]*

The protagonist realises that although she is rejecting, her orientation is still on the salesman and the technology. From her new position on the edge of stage she is both able to realise this, and also able to break the fixation and identify there is another 'her'. Rather than get into any sort of intellectualising conversation, the director wants to build upon Clare's rising spontaneity and so directs Clare to act:

*Director: Choose somebody to be you over there.*

The protagonist chooses somebody from the group and as she is placing her on the stage, the director says to the protagonist:

*Director: Be this person.*

The protagonist stands in the new position and takes up the new functioning with the chosen auxiliary now standing alongside observing what is about to be enacted. Clare is orientated away from the pile of devices and facing another direction says:

*Clare: I like to be connected with others, to feel their touch, to be tactile.*

The protagonist is now orientating on being physically connected with others. The director 'produces the protagonist's script' by choosing three auxiliaries from the group 'audience' to be the others and instructs them to stand near the protagonist. The protagonist acknowledges the presence of the others and takes their hands. This is accepted by the friends. It is not seen as necessary at this stage for role reversal. Talking to her friends, Clare says:

*Clare: Sure, I use some of these things.*

She takes three of the devices in the pile and places them behind her. The group of friends have an easy and friendly discussion about the various devices including comments about their advantages and disadvantages. This continues on for a period of time with the director seeing it as useful interaction for building the protagonist's experience of being in a supportive and cooperative situation. The director has a hypothesis that the protagonist has habitually operated in an isolated position in relation to strong coercive people (the salesman being one example). The director sees that this current

new functioning may well be able to be carried over to the confrontational situation so that Clare does not lose herself as she has in the past. The director who is standing on the edge of the stage is still aware of the salesman and wants this new functioning tested against the initial disturbance. The director doesn't want a resolution that is untested and so potentially nothing better than a fantasy:

*Director: Okay, salesman away you go.*

*Salesman: That's not enough. You need these things as well. [The auxiliary being the salesman is correctly assuming the identity of the salesman and is therefore keen to continue to convince Clare.]*

*Clare: No I don't.*

Clare responds in a manner different from her previous functioning. There is quiet self-surety and not the previous whinging tone and authority focus. So, Clare has a new response to the salesman. This is a new situation for the salesman and the director is curious about how Clare as salesman will respond:

*Director: Reverse roles.*

*Salesman: Yes, you do. Here take them.*

The salesman hands several more devices to Clare with her friends. The director then decides to challenge the salesman to see if he can change his behaviour in response to Clare's new behaviour. The director does not have an agenda of wanting behaviour change, but is interested in social investigation. The director says to Clare as salesman:

*Director: Can't you see she doesn't need more. Look, she is wanting and appreciating being with people. Can you appreciate that?*

*Salesman: She should still have more.*

The salesman is unchanging, and remains fixed and rigid. The director decides a further role test will be useful for the 'new' Clare:

*Director: Reverse roles.*

*Salesman: You need more.*

*Clare: Honestly I don't need them. Take them back.*

Clare makes a clear, friendly and confident action of handing the devices back, and as she does this the auxiliary as salesman correctly persists in his stubborn and doggedly determined manner:

*Salesman: Try them first, and then you'll know.*

*Clare: I don't need them. Here they are.*

This is done decisively, and clearly without conflict or doubt, but there is also friendliness, so that the protagonist is not getting into any kind of competitive or aggressive dynamic with the salesman. The protagonist then returns to interacting with her friends. The salesman becomes impotent through being ignored. The 'spell' of the salesman is broken by the protagonist having a clear connection with herself as a person who values being connected with others. With this orientation she is able to have a useful attitude to the offerings of technology where she is able to take some and also say no to others:

*Director: That's very good. Great. Let's finish here. We'll have sharing now. Thank you auxiliaries.*

The warmth and value expressed in the sharing indicated that the enactment was useful and meaningful to the group. The sharing also assisted the protagonist to transition from absorption in their own world to re-connecting with the group.

### Action Research and Action Methods Compared

Examination of the literature suggests several connections between AR and AM as presented in Table I. Consideration of the vignette using the six 'characteristics' of AR given in the left hand column should stimulate some interesting reflections on the connections between AM and AR.

Action research*	Action methods†
Critical; evaluative	Investigative; focus on discriminating analysis and informed body-mind cognition
Participatory; collaborative	Each person is treated as a creative genius; psychodrama was devised as a group method
Empowering; emancipatory	Expands psychological and social functioning; focuses on creativity and spontaneity
Active	Involves dramatic techniques, interventions, and group members taking initiative
Systematic; cyclic	Practice informed by theory; involves phases of production, investigation, and intervention
Reflective	Use of sharing and mirror techniques; theory and knowledge informed by practice

\*Summarised from Melrose (2001), Reason & Bradbury (2001) and Zuber-Skerritt (1996).

†Summarised from Clayton (1992, 1993, 1994) and Moreno (1946, 1953).

Table I. Action research and action methods similarities.

*Critical and Evaluative*

Typically, and as done in this vignette, the group leader identifies a group theme and this assists the selection of a protagonist that best embodies that theme for the group. During the vignette, the director was continually analysing the functioning of the protagonist and what would assist the protagonist to move forward. However, how much other group members were engaged in critical analysis was mostly left to them. In this vignette only the protagonist was actively encouraged by the group leader to make an analysis. This occurred when the protagonist identified that she was captured in a useless dynamic with the computer salesman. It also appeared that the protagonist may have been discouraged from a critique of herself at times by the speed of role reversal and amount of time spent in different roles. In several instances, it did not appear there was time for the protagonist to make an analysis of her situation. This is sometimes done on purpose by the director so that the protagonist will not engage in a habitual intellectualising process (Clayton, 1994). It would therefore appear that at times the action nature of psychodrama creates a different type of critique or analysis to that commonly occurring in AR.

*Participatory and Collaborative*

Psychodrama was explicitly formulated as a group method, and it is hoped that group members become motivated and aroused because they are involved, can take initiative, and progress and momentum is generated. But how much do group members work together? And what is the nature of the director's 'directing' and its impact? This would naturally depend on individual groups and their directors. If we look at the vignette there are several pertinent observations. Group members are involved as themselves at various times in the beginning, pre-enactment phase and the sharing phase. During the other times they are being 'auxiliaries' or audience members, and so would be mostly orientated on others and their needs. The protagonist and director are working together, mostly. The director assists the protagonist to produce her world on stage by asking her to choose people to be roles and to have role reversals. The director also makes interventions, such as when he invites the protagonist to the edge of the stage area to watch a re-enactment. So, initiatives were taken quite often by the director. Without good training and careful practice, the nature of AM means a psychodrama director could easily dominate or impose their will on a group. It appears AR in general has had a greater focus on power relationships and the devising of processes that assist empowerment of all. Psychodrama would appear to rest more on the ethics and proficiency of the director, and the capabilities of the group.



*Empowering and Emancipatory*

In AM the focus is on empowering and emancipating the individuals in the group. In the vignette, the undesirable dominating influence of an aggressive salesperson, and a conflict about what technological gadgets to use was changed through a change in attitude and perception of the protagonist. However, in comparison with much AR practice, there was no intention or efforts to influence and impact upon the actual salesperson. In this case, it did not matter, a change in the protagonist was enough. However, in many other situations in which AR concerns itself, change is also needed and sought for in the wider social, organisational and political contexts.

*Active*

By the nature of the method, there was a great deal of action by most members of the group throughout the session. Ideas and interventions, such as having friends, were tested on the spot. There was the opportunity to refine or come up with new actions if the initial ones were not successful. Where AM differs from AR in the area of action is that AM explicitly focuses on fine grain aspects of individuals' actions. For example, the physical orientation of the protagonist (e.g. the difference between orientation towards the salesman and the friends), the tone of interaction with the salesman, and the touching of hands with friends.

*Systematic and Cyclic*

From an AR perspective, the vignette could be seen as having a phase of investigation as the initial situation with the computer salesperson was laid out. Followed by an intervention by the director to have the protagonist view a re-enactment. The protagonist then came up with a possible alternative by identifying that she was more than what had been portrayed so far and she was a person who can connect with others. This was tried out and tested against the salesman, which involved another phase of investigation. There was therefore an iteration of phases. If the intervention had not been found to be useful, then a new plan, and intervention could have been devised and tried out. The difference with AR is the length of time in each phase. The investigation and action phases of AR are much longer in duration or conceptualised as being much longer.

*Reflective*

The use of the stage provides many opportunities for group members, and the protagonist in particular, to view themselves from different perspectives. In the vignette, the protagonist viewed her functioning from many perspectives including all the perspectives of her system. The viewing of her behaviour with the salesman from a more distant witness position on the edge of the action area was instrumental in assisting her to reflect and come

up with another idea. Group members also had some opportunities to reflect. Most notably, during the post-enactment sharing phase in which group members described their experience of the enactment and some integrated that with the theme of the group and their warm-up. In addition, the director who was researching the dynamics between people and technology, also reflected on the dynamics that had been presented and what the group had made of them. He noted there was a common theme in a lot of his work in this area that was also present in this work. It concerned isolation. Many people using technology do it in a situation of isolation, and from this position find it hard to cope with many of the difficulties and breakdowns that occur with computer systems and technology. The director also noted that this also reflected a deep concern in his own life and the striving he was making to break isolation and really connect with others. The director-researcher also reflected on the ability of the psychodrama method to implement this intervention. There were therefore contributions to theory and knowledge. This would make it similar to the work of reflection in AR. However, the vignette is atypical in this regard. AM practitioners are mostly not focused on the refinement and informing of theory apart from the theory of AM itself.

In summary, this is only an initial and brief examination of the connections between the two complex practices of AM and AR and can only be tentative. Perhaps it is too premature to say that there is a natural and easy alignment between AM and AR. Certainly, there are similarities and shared values. However, there are many differences and this is a good thing. These distinctions potentially mean that each has things to offer the other. In this article, I want to focus on what AM could potentially offer AR.

### Some Ways AM Can Be Used in AR

While there are action researchers aware of AM and are utilising AM in their practice, the larger proportion of AR appears unaware (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). AM do not appear on lists of methods to be used in AR (for example, Winter, 1996). It will be useful, therefore, to present some examples of how AM can be used in AR. This is done in three sections: building an action researcher's functioning, learning organisations, and organisational change and development. Following these examples, some specific suggestions will be given on AM techniques that action researchers could take up. There is also a discussion on the implications of the central psychodramatic principle of spontaneity.

#### *Building an Action Researcher's Functioning*

The ability of an action researcher to reflect on and communicate their own functioning and impact on others, and to improve practice is valued highly in AR (Hall, 1996). AM can be used in a number of ways for these ends.

Using a similar format to the vignette presented above, an action researcher could be a protagonist who is assisted by a director to 'layout' the different factors at play in their research and the researcher's interaction with them. Peter Hawkins (1988) provides lively and clear illustrations of various ways this can be done psychodramatically in a chapter entitled 'A phenomenological psychodrama workshop'. Peter shows how you as a researcher can use psychodrama to:

*look at the assumptions you are carrying into your fieldwork; how you can explore your roles and choices as researcher; how you can explore the many levels of data by sculpturing the data, becoming it and exploring how various aspects of the data relate; finally, how through reframing you can illuminate the underlying structure from various angles. (p. 70)*

The work between director and the researcher as protagonist can go further by focusing on how the researcher can improve their practice. The specific way that this is done is devised by the protagonist. They are the agent of their own change; the enabling or progressive solution is generated from the action researcher as protagonist.

**A powerful mechanism of psychodrama that is always at work for progressive change is that of generating new perspectives,** especially that of the witness, as we saw in the vignette with Clare. Hawkins (1988) describes how 'with a delightful simplicity that combines clarity and depth' (p. 71) psychodrama provides the means for this which he also argues achieves *transcendental subjectivity*: the second epoch of Husserl's phenomenology. As a protagonist, the person is not talking about themselves, but is being and becoming in the here and now. They are moved around the different elements (roles) within the system they have laid out, and experience different perspectives and degrees of subjectivity and objectivity. The paradox of this experience is aptly indicated by the term psychodramatists use to describe the reflection back to the self of itself in the external world – *mirroring*. Just like in a real mirror, there is both a unity in that the image and real thing are identical, and there is a separation. However, when experience is spatially and visually enacted in the psychodramatic stage, then understanding that embraces all elements of the mind and body and surpasses both can be achieved; the concurrent unity and separation of self and other is possible. An environment is created that encourages participatory consciousness. The psychodrama stage and method not only encourages the openness and enchantment considered essential to bringing about participatory consciousness (Heshusius, 1994), but also the other attitudes of being creative, purposeful and thoughtful, which tend to be neglected or not integrated. Presence of all are necessary for the full presence of the self, which is also necessary for any intimate connection with another.

Psychodrama also offers ways for others to be involved in an action researcher's work. Transparency of how a researcher constructs their

meanings and interpretations is seen as critical to AR, yet Hall (1996) claims action researchers 'fail to sufficiently display their interpretative work' (p. 28). The most immediately apparent way psychodrama can assist this is by having the researcher become a protagonist and be assisted by a director to layout and enact the meaning-making process. The members of the group then have a very immediate and direct view and experience of the process. This can be translated to a wider audience by some capture of the psychodrama, such as an annotated transcript or even video of the session. The advantage of the 'live' psychodrama is that other group members are not just passive recipients of the researcher displaying themselves, but can become active engagers with the researcher such that the researcher's work becomes a living co-creation of all present. This could be an excellent way to build an AR team.

These methods share many similarities with co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001). They assist the building of a reflective practitioner through both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), and fostering the close co-operation of a teacher and an apprentice (Schön, 1987). That practitioners have 'a capacity for reflection on their intuitive knowing in the midst of action' (Schön, 1983, p. viii) is strongly supported by work in AM. However, Schön's (1983) assumption that most of knowing-in-practice is tacit is perhaps not realising the power of will and attention to expand consciousness. Certainly, most of the time this knowledge is not available to consciousness and, therefore, might be called tacit; however, when the appropriate situation arises, then the knowledge can be available to consciousness and awareness and discernment can be encouraged and developed. Psychodrama explicitly seeks to do this. Work in the field of expertise has also developed methods to leverage situated awareness to assist 'knowledge elicitation', for example, using video replay (Carter et al, 2001) and the Critical Decision Method of Hoffman et al (1998).

### *Learning Organisations*

If an action researcher becomes a psychodrama director and uses AM, then very many opportunities arise. As a method utilising a blank stage area in which anything can be projected and any process enacted, and as a method founded on spontaneity and the co-creative engagement of people with each other in the here and now situation, psychodrama is unlimited in what might be attempted.

The following description is of a one-off psychodrama workshop run by the author, which was part of a 2-day faculty conference consisting of workshops and research presentations. The psychodrama workshop was attended by 16 tertiary teachers and one head of department focusing on the building of teaching practice. It gives one example of what might be done using AM within learning organisations.

Initial discussion in the workshop revealed that construction and running of group assignments was of great concern. The teachers are part of a tertiary institute that highly values learning and has class sizes of about 20 students each. Most papers have a group assignment that aims to develop students interpersonal and group work skills within the context of achieving a set of tasks. **The workshop group decided to enact a student group meeting, and explore the dynamics and what teaching interventions would be useful.** First a table was placed in the stage area and a set of chairs were placed around it. The group decided this would be the first meeting of the student group. The director invited group members to think of a student who might work in this group. One workshop group member was immediately warmed up and the director invited her to take a place at the table. The director interviewed her, and found out what kind of student and person she was. She was an A student who was apprehensive because her previous experience of other student groups was that other students would not match her commitment or quality of work, and she would be dragged down. A number of other students were subsequently 'concretised' on the stage. These included a newly arrived student from overseas who was having great difficulties understanding the local accent. The scene started with the 'A' student taking up a leadership role and asking if everyone was there. One student said that, no his friend was missing, but he could ring him. This was done with the absent student on the edge of the stage. This student was extremely busy and did not value being with the group more than what they were already doing.

In a very simple and engaging way a number of typical dynamics of student groups were set up in the enactment. The purpose of the session was to improve teaching practice. Specifically, what teacher interventions would assist this student group to both achieve the tasks of the assignment, and also assist individual students to develop their awareness and abilities in group work. This was continually and utmost on the director's mind and it was equally utmost that this would be generated by and from within the group. It was essential that the director had this perspective of the teaching group because the teachers did not have it of the student group, as we will see.

The student group began to get into its work. It soon became apparent there was a major difficulty with the student from overseas who couldn't understand. The students requested the teacher to intervene and do something. The director said to the teachers who remained in the audience that a number of them could be the teacher and try out different interventions with the group one by one. This was done and largely found to be ineffective for the presenting problem. The teachers were largely trying to solve the problem for the students. They were also using language that the overseas student couldn't understand. The teaching group was stuck. However, this in itself was an advancement: the workshop had generated greater awareness of a limitation in learning strategies in this area.

Looking at the entire enactment and thinking systemically, the director decided to try different role reversals. In one of these, the overseas student was role reversed with the current teacher. From this new position and from her previous intimate knowledge of 'being' the student, this new 'teacher' knew that there was a friend from the same country who had a good grasp of the local dialect who might be willing to help. This person was brought to the group and was, indeed, found to be very helpful. The group found out that the student member from overseas was, in fact, extremely knowledgeable in the area of the assignment. From being considered a limitation on the group, the student became highly valued, and the student group became more warmed up to each other and seeing value in what they were doing. In a similar fashion, other dynamics in the group were explored and played with.

The stage was then cleared, and the group was invited to build on the enactment by expressing their experiences and insights. The enactment was found to be very useful for many participants. One person realised that they could give up immediately thinking of how to solve the problem for students to immediately thinking of how to assist students to overcome their own problems.

This example gives but one taste of how AM could be used in learning organisations. Due to the practical orientation of AM practitioners most uses of AM for learning organisations have not been documented. However, a good illustrative example is Rollo Browne's (1999) description of how the systemic perspective of AM assisted him greatly when working as a consultant on staff development concerning bullying and harassment in a school. Grace Kennedy (2000) also outlines the role of psychodrama in assisting her to set up transformation learning for high school students.

The use of AM has much to offer the re-energizing of universities, which has been a major focus for AR (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It is interesting to reflect on my own functioning within a university. Through years of dedication and practice, psychodrama methods and perspectives have become internalised, and are central to my approach to life. It is also significant that I had an instant attraction to the method and have recent ancestors who were Maori shamans. I documented my use of AM during a 1-week period. Events included assisting an international student group that had fallen out. Using action methods in an undergraduate class to understand how a particular computer-based tutorial assisted and hindered their learning and the ways it could be designed better. As programme leader for IT, I assisted a student and lecturer to build a relationship focused on learning where the lecturer valued what they were teaching, and the student saw they were being valued and visible. As a post-graduate supervisor, I assisted a student to realise he could add his own knowing to his work and not just parrot others. I stood by him as another teacher prepared to put him before a discipline committee. As director of a computer system usability research centre, we used AM to try out different arrangements for conducting testing involving a computer user, facilitator and a logger.

Significantly, we found that situated interviewing is an incredibly rich data gathering and analysis method that delivers in a timely way for industry, but is mostly unused in academia. Finally, I was addressing a group of first-year students and assisting them to decide what major to take. I had already had a 12-hour day and just addressed one group. I said I was tired and having trouble getting warmed up to the task and asked for questions I could address. However, one person was very abrupt and demanding. I said that I was not a robot and felt I was being treated like a MacDonald's checkout person. The group was appreciative of this, and we were able to have a useful and lively session. I believe that assisting new students to see learning as involving entering into a mutually respecting and honest relationship is essential if we hope to counter the tendency for teachers to be seen and treated as product deliverers, and students as consumers.

#### *Organisational Change and Development*

In similar ways, AM can also be used very effectively for organisational change and development. For example, I have used psychodrama to assist organisations become aware of workers' attitudes to and experience with computing systems, and to create more useful and realistic procedures and support for computer users (Carter, 2000). One enactment revealed a considerable gap in understanding between computer users, and the organisation's computer support and help people. Users realised that they can have unrealistic expectations at times; computers are highly complex and there is no one person who can solve all problems. Users acknowledged that they needed to take more responsibility for troubleshooting. Support people developed more compassion by realising that some people who are capable and confident in other areas of their lives, can become hypersensitive in relation to using computers and easily alienated by jargon. There was a breakdown of stereotyping by both parties. There was the acknowledgement that we are all in this together, and our frustrations and delight with using computers are experienced by most others. There was also the realisation that some dynamics are not well understood. For example, the tendency by both technophiles and technophobes to associate magical qualities to the computer.

Many AM practitioners are principally involved in working as organisational consultants (Breen, 1991), but once again little of this work is documented. One example is [Vivienne Thomson's \(1997\) work \*Using Sociodrama for Organisation Development: expressions of soul at work.\*](#)

#### *Some Initial AM Techniques for Action Researchers to Play With*

So as an action researcher, what AM techniques could you take up and use in your work? I will introduce some techniques that I hope will be stimulating and useful. I trust that as action researchers you already seek the empowerment and emancipation of others, and so will endeavour to use

these methods in constructive and uplifting ways. I also anticipate that you will give careful thought to your use of these methods, and that you will reflect on your experience and be assisted by supervision and colleagues. That being said, I also encourage you to take up these methods in a spirit of adventure knowing that difficulties and failures are always part of a journey of adventure when anything of value is obtained.

Take the role of a drama director and become aware of the layout of the physical space when the group first meets and how this is impacting on the way the group is functioning. If you are leading or facilitating the group, try setting up the group in a U-shaped seating arrangement with a space out the front. Notice what effect this has on the functioning of the group. My experience is that the arrangement allows every group member to see every other group member and this encourages interaction. Group members also find they are drawn towards the open space; it invites them to do something. This can be built on by inviting group members to create their internal reality in the empty area. This U-shaped seating arrangement also facilitates easy movement to action.

While the psychodrama stage can contain and enact any reality in its full systemic nature, it might be best to start with dyadic subsystems. For example, a person may feel very attracted to being open in a group and at the same time fearful. These two states can be concretised using an auxiliary and the protagonist. Role reversal is used so that the protagonist enacts both roles or ways of being, and also gets to experience them from both perspectives. Simple role reversal can be extremely powerful by itself and a powerful enactment can occur in a short period of time. For example, a group member may express difficulty in relating to a boss. The boss and the person can be concretised, and at some stage the protagonist will role reverse with and become the boss. This may be the first time they have done this.

You may also want to assist the protagonist to produce more complex systems. Often it is useful to get the protagonist to layout the physical elements of the scene before populating it with people. The most useful heuristic is for the director to follow the protagonist's script. This means the director simply assists the protagonist to produce on the stage whatever is in their consciousness and experience. However, if the presenting situation is of great concern and distress to the protagonist, it is useful to follow the principle of working from the periphery to the centre and concretising progressive aspects of functioning before coming to the area of distress. For example, in the boss example, a director may invite the protagonist to create a scene where they are relating from their own authority at the same time as relating with an authority figure. This can be done by asking the protagonist to choose the best teacher they have ever had and to have this relationship on the stage before going to the interaction with the boss. This is an example of transferring functioning. The protagonist in one situation is able to maintain himself while relating to an authority figure (the teacher), but not



in another. By having both situations on the stage, the protagonist may be role reversed between them and this will assist them to maintain themselves while they are interacting with the boss. It is important to note that there are no formulas, and that each person's life situation and path toward expanded functioning and being more alive is different. AR has also valued transferring of knowledge although in a larger social context than here (Greenwood & Levin, 1998).

A related approach is that of building the progressive functioning of a person so that the health in the system overwhelms the disease. An example of progressive functioning, as illustrated in the salesman vignette, is the witness. This is achieved in psychodrama at any time by simply getting someone from the audience to be the protagonist and having the protagonist go to the edge of the stage and witness a re-enactment. During this it is useful to stand beside the protagonist and get the protagonist to act on their insights not just intellectualise them in a conversation with you.

As an action method, the group benefits considerably by the director assisting them to be conscious of their non-verbal behaviour. For example, a director can be aware of the tele between any two people. That is, what is the feeling valency between these two people – the attraction or repulsion. For example, the director may ask a protagonist whether they feel closer or further away from someone as a result of what that person has just done or said, and to physically place themselves in that position.

Dramatic enactment can also be used for the whole group. For example, a group can quickly and accurately obtain 'pictures' of how the group is in relation to a question, issue or each other. A common example is spectograms where group members are requested to place themselves on a continuum in relation to a question. For example, I facilitated a session of academic programme leaders who had been requested by management to mandate student ID numbers only on exam scripts; names were to be removed. The motivating idea was that this would assist markers to be impartial, an idea supported by many teachers. However, other teachers saw it as yet another 'procedure' that reduced trust in them as professionals and removed learning opportunities. As facilitator, I simply laid out a physical continuum in the room and invited each person to put themselves somewhere on the line. One end was designated as being 100% for and the other 100% against. Although the group had never used AM before in this group, the exercise was done easily and quickly. It was useful to call it what it was – seeing where we all were in relation to this question – rather than call it an action method. Within a short time each member had a clear idea of where each other member stood in relation to the question. Using the usual round the table discussion this would have taken considerably longer, if at all. I then had different people express why they stood where they stood. This warmed the group up considerably, and the group sat down to a lively and friendly discussion. The spectogram was then done at the end of the discussion, which revealed some movement on the issue.

Another example is a sociometric readout where group members physically display their connections with each other. For example, each group member can be requested to put his or her hand on the shoulder of the person he or she can most learn from. The group can do this all at once. The group leader can then elaborate by asking each person to express what it is they can learn from their chosen person. Once again, this exercise need not be called sociometry, AM or psychodrama, but can simply be called what it is: seeing who we can learn most from. Framing in this way assists people to enter into the activity without a label that could invoke useless conceptualisations or arguments.

Hopefully, some of these ideas are interesting to you and will be useful in your work. Studying the vignette again and seeing these methods within a context of use will be useful. Of course, you will benefit greatly from seeking out and receiving specific training in AM.

### *Reflection on Psychodrama's Use of Action*

It is now possible to reflect a little on psychodrama's use of action. Hawkins (1988) found through personal experience that 'one of the difficulties with phenomenology, and why phenomenologists are so hard to read, is that they try and do so many things inside their heads.' (p. 61). He enthused about the simplicity and ease with which the psychodramatic stage and method assisted through the use of concretisation (the externalising of internal realities and processes through projection).

This process of concretisation is a profound ability and natural to us as self-reflective physical beings living in a physical world. For example, writing is a form of concretisation where internal thoughts and experiences are externalised as words. This gives a different perspective and the ability to play with, experiment and re-arrange the representation. This process can assist the writer to gain clarity, refine their thinking and create something of aesthetic value. The externalisation has a meaning that can now also be appreciated by others. Psychodrama provides the same abilities. However, by leveraging dramatic techniques, it provides several abilities not present in speaking or writing. The three-dimensional stage area means the systemic nature of a situation can be laid out in a full and dynamic presentation. There is no limit to what can be present and how it can be present. Elements and processes externalised can be played with, creatively arranged and re-arranged, and new behaviours tested out. In a research context, the researcher has instant collaboration and checking out with the subject. This increases rigour. A process can also be slowed down so that all the factors and experiences that occur during the process can be seen clearly. Any single aspect of the system can be focused on in detail without losing its context. This ability to iterate between part and whole is necessary for understanding as described by Gadamer (1976) in his description of the hermeneutic circle:

*The movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed. (p. 117)*

The use of action and space also tends to wake us up and engage all of our faculties. There is stimulation of the right side of the brain which introduces what Gregory Bateson (1972) describes as analogic mapping rather than just digital explanation. An experienced psychodramatist reflecting on his own process described it as:

*Involved in this process of visualisation there appears to be a lifting of the human spirit as he looks at himself. As he sees himself, he's not caught up in an intellectualisation process. Rather it is a process which involves him in both thinking and feeling simultaneously. So we could conclude that the concretisation and maximisation in the associated visualisation is resulting in a greater integration of different aspects of himself. (Carter et al, 2001)*

Group members in psychodrama are also encouraged to make interpretations based on actions (body language and affect), as well as content (Clayton, 1994). This tends to inculcate a group culture where there is less of a propensity for group members to predict what another person is going to do or say, and so people tend to wait until someone has finished talking. There are many other ways that psychodrama, which was explicitly formulated as a group method, can provide fresh perspectives on group work. This is best illustrated by examining the foundation theory of spontaneity creativity.

#### *Implications of the Theory of Spontaneity*

Psychodramatists typically see humanity, if not the whole universe, as open systems that have an innate propensity and urging towards creativity and expansion of experience and consciousness. 'What characterizes human nature is an unlimited capacity for spontaneous and creative action' (Moreno, 1975, 39). 'Life is a powerful dynamic force constantly pushing human beings toward new development' (Clayton, 1994, p. 1). New insights from science increasingly support this view of an open and creative universe:

*Thus an inherent spontaneity in the life of nature has once again been recognized by science, after a denial lasting over 300 years. The future is not fully determined in advance; it is open. Insofar as it can be modelled mathematically, it has to be modelled in terms of chaotic dynamics. And this chaos, openness, spontaneity and freedom of nature provide the matrix for evolutionary creativity ...*

*Indeterminism, spontaneity and creativity have re-emerged throughout the natural world. Immanent purposes or ends are now modelled in terms of attractors ... For the modern conception of nature gives an even stronger sense of her spontaneous life and creativity than the stable, repetitive world of Greek, medieval and Renaissance philosophy. All nature is evolutionary. The cosmos is like a great developing organism, and evolutionary creativity is inherent in nature herself. (Sheldrake, 1990, pp. 71 and 75)*

The central principle of psychodrama is spontaneity (Moreno, 1946, 1953; Holmes et al, 1994; Blatner, 2000). The generation of spontaneity and the liberation of creativity is the primary goal (Kipper, 1967). Enormously attracted to this, I have endeavoured over the years to formulate a clear description of spontaneity that could also inform practice (Carter, 1994). Currently, I describe spontaneity as an aroused and integrated presence of self freely and creatively engaged with the here and now. This puts the here and now as the only place for experience. Past and future are conceptualised from the present. For example, the present is considered an opportunity to re-invent the imprint of the past. The description is also built on the premise that the universe is an open system that is new and expanded in each new moment, and that human beings have an innate urge to create and expand consciousness and experience.

Psychodrama explicitly aims to foster spontaneity and for people to act creatively in the moment. Creativity is removed from grandiose and rare events to being possible in the common events of daily interactions. People are encouraged to have a love affair with the process of creating, not just the products of creativity. The idolatry of the artefacts of creativity and reification of 'artists' is compared with each individual being in an active state of co-creating in the here and now. The description unifies being with becoming. We need *to be* in order to be in contact with current experience and the current environment, and we need *to become*. The embracing of ourselves as creative and purposeful beings has several useful products.

An orientation of spontaneity and health means there is not so much propensity for reducing everything to a problem and go hunting for a solution. This is a very important perspective for AR to consider in their conceptualisation of their work. Typically models of AR place problem formulation and description as an initial and framing step. For example, Checkland & Scholes' (1990) *Soft System Methodology* and Greenwood & Levin's (1998) epistemological foundations (p. 75), co-generative model (p. 116) and search conferences (p. 163). What would happen if AR changed this orientating focus from problem solving to looking for the opportunities and purpose; to looking for what is developing so there is a focus on building and expanding? This appears to fit in easily with what is actually done in AR work. I suggest it would also be highly beneficial, as it would create a different warm-up, which is more uplifting to the human spirit. The central purposes of being emancipatory and transforming would be given their

primary position. It does not mean there would be a disregard for difficulties or careful analysis, but that the danger of becoming fixated on the problem is lessened.

Let us consider the abortion issue, where the two main positions are an intimate part of each parties value system. Framing the situation as a problem of intolerance or inability to reach compromise has not been useful. An alternative health focus would acknowledge that there was great division and disturbances, but would primarily focus on building what health there was. It would not give any more focus or energy to dismissal or moral judgement that is currently poisoning the interaction. Instead, there may be a focus on building dialogue. Perhaps parties could share personal experiences that could not be argued about. There would be the possibility of respect and caring developing without either party having to move any of their beliefs or values around the issue.

Another example is in the area of technological advances and the threats they pose. Some see technology as the enemy (Sheldrake, 1990). Joy (2000) reveals emerging technologies as potentially catastrophic and sees the only realistic alternative as, '*relinquishment*: to limit development of the technologies that are too dangerous, by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge' (p. 254). However, we appear to be very low in confidence and dignity. This is witnessed by our urgency to self-promote, fragile bubbles of self-importance and ineffectual strivings for control (Shapiro et al, 1996). Moreno (1983) argued that we have taken on various messages, such as those from Copernicus, Darwin, Mendel and Freud, which have progressively reduced our perceived importance and power in the universe. If so, the calls to relinquish will not succour the human spirit and given our innate urge to create will be rejected. Alternatively, we might perceive our technology tendencies as part of who we are. We might then encourage ourselves to be even more creative. Perhaps, in such a way we might awaken more to the here and now reality, and build our self-worth and dignity. We might then have a new relationship with nature that is based on nurture, respect and cooperation without giving up any of our power.

We are tested though. By being an open system (the human being) living in an open universe means there is no absolute security. However, there is nothing new in our current anxiety to the dynamic nature of life; such anxiety has been around for a very long time. We don't have the luxury to wait for an ideal or safe situation to arise, we must act now:

*To throw oneself into the middle of life, to express oneself freely in the moment without regard to whether this is exhilarating or scary is the action of a heroic person ... This leap into life must be taken. We concentrate all our energies into one brief moment of time.*  
(Clayton, 1994, p. 1)

The embracing of purpose is central to assisting us to rise above the emotional need to be safe. If we can embrace purpose and find ways to work

together, we will be assisted to warm up to adventure and moving forward, rather than being ruled by anxiety and emotional needs for safety and security. We will be better able to honour differences and not expect everyone to be like us. We will replace our reflex anxiety to the unknown by developing abilities to embrace it and engage our purpose, intuition and creative abilities. The orientation on being spontaneous and creative while in relationship will be more uplifting, fulfilling and energising than current orientations on effectiveness, efficiency, rights and responsibilities.

Motivated by common purpose, group interactions need not be 'policed' so much. Greenwood and Levin's (1998) description of a search conference outlines certain rules for interaction such as 'criticism of the ideas of others is not permitted ... no one is permitted to dominate the airtime or to shut others down' (p. 169). This appears to be somewhat naïve as group members unwittingly trigger other members into feeling dominated and shut down. Rather than focus on such policing measures, psychodramatic group 'rules' focus on bringing out the reality of what is actually going on and working with it so people are more aware of their own and others' functioning and also invite the group to work with each other so that the group moves forward. These types of approaches are important if AR wishes to 'keep the conversation going'.

As well as being purposeful, spontaneous functioning involves thinking. Thinking is usually considered a hindrance to being spontaneous, but thinking that is informed by the body, and in contact with the here and now promotes it. Thinking such as ponderous intellectualising and excessive planning out in advance are thinking processes that have lost touch with the here and now, and the body's current experience.

The final implication of the description is the idea of engagement. Psychodramatic spontaneity involves an engagement and connection with those around and the environment, as well as the self. There is the strong belief and experience that the spontaneity of the group can be increased by the spontaneity of the group members (Clayton, 1994). This is quite different from commonly understood spontaneity, which is a person just doing what they feel like with little regard for the group. Such 'spontaneous' individuals are rightfully seen as impulsive, self-absorbed and jarring on others. In a culture of alienated individuals we have unfortunately seen the freedom of the individual being in conflict with the needs of the group. The implication of spontaneity is that everyone is a creative genius and we can co-create together with each person fully in their own power and authority. Such a perspective assists one to be relaxed about others and have genuine respect. There is not so much a tendency to be earnest or superior as would appear to be the situation for some psychotherapists' conceptualisation and use of empathy (Bohart & Greenberg, 1997).

Does the psychodrama director become too powerful and influential? Habermas' (1984) aim for an ideal speech situation free of domination and coercion is too idealistic. We are continually impacting on each other

whether we try to or not and it is more useful to distinguish different types of power (Torbert, 1991). Gaventa & Cornwall (2001) argue that the generation of knowledge during AR can itself become a form of power that can be used to further entrench useless and limiting structures. To negate the power and the associated risk is also to severely limit what may be achieved. So, continual consideration and reflection is required. A close network of collegial and supervised practice is common in psychodrama. There are also mechanisms such as the director making an analysis of the protagonist's locus of authority. Is the protagonist relating to an external authority such as trying to please the director? If so, the director needs to move carefully and slowly. The more they are relating to themselves and their own experience, the more adventurous the director may be. This could be usefully added to some of the structures action researchers have developed (Torbert, 1991; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

### **Conclusions**

I hope action researchers are encouraged to creatively apply some of the components, techniques and perspectives of AM that have been presented here. Following the theory of spontaneity an action researcher may wish to change their initial task from problem identification to health identification. They may also wish to utilise the dramatic stage and techniques in order to encourage the integrated presence of all human facilities in the living dynamics of individuals co-creating in the here-and-now moment.

While AR and AM have distinctive backgrounds with their own unique theoretical basis and set of methods, they both have similar worldviews with similar objectives and principles. Hopefully, this article shows that AM can benefit AR. A future study could show how AR can benefit AM. It appears that connections between AR and AM could be strengthened for mutual benefit. Perhaps uniting the two under a common banner would be beneficial. One potentially profitable effort in this area would be the expansion of current descriptions of action science (Argyris et al, 1985; Friedman, 2001).

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