Making Space for Difference: The CARPP Approach to Action Research

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At the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP), action research is embodied in a distinctive way that is eclectic and varied yet thematically coherent and values-based. This paper offers an articulation of this approach, using an experimental presentational form that combines descriptive storied form with analytical exploration. This exploration describes CARPP Action Research as the creation of 'different spaces' in which the action researcher/facilitator seeks to create qualities of boundedness, safety and validity, working with participants through cycles of action and reflection. Practices to engender such qualities are described and it is proposed that these offer an 'emancipatory potential' that, when realised, enables participants to take action outwards to the social and institutional settings of which they are a part. Two illustrative stories of practice are given, one describing how an MSc student in CARPP established an inquiry group, the other describing an action research programme with managers. The stories show how some of the qualities and values of the Centre are enacted through detailed practice that is sensitive to context. Links to critical theory are offered, and some questions as to the enduring consequences of such practice are considered.

Key words: communicative space, reflective practice, collaborative action research, emancipation, stories

Setting the scene

Story 1: One evening in spring

M: On a warm Monday evening in May 2005, twelve women converge on an open-plan airy meeting room in a local community centre on the outskirts of Bath. A hubbub of laughter and chat swells as old friends meet again and new introductions are made. Hot drinks cupped in hands the group take their seats, and an expectant quiet descends. Stepping for the first time into my role as facilitator, I swallow and, slightly dry-mouthed begin. I welcome them to the kick-off meeting of a co-operative inquiry entitled "My Work – My Life". The shared question is: "How can we live and work meaningfully in this modern age?" This is the first of four planned workshops scheduled over the next six months and it is the first time I've taken action inquiry outside the safe confines of the University where we've been 'doing inquiry' on my MSc. I feel excited and nervous at the same time. Foremost in my mind are questions as to how I might enable expressive, open inquiry to take place. I am conscious of wanting this meeting to be different to what participants might normally expect –it should be neither work meeting nor social gathering – but somewhere else between the formal and informal gatherings that circumscribe our normal home and working lives. There is a mix of friends, colleagues and new acquaintances attending this first evening. What do the participants expect from tonight – from me? In my career as an engineering manager I've run many meetings before, but tonight is quite different. I feel some considerable trepidation as I welcome these 12 women who are now looking at me, smiling and expectant.

Story 2: A summer's day

G: It is mid-summer in a coastal town, and a soft, misty rain is merging the sea and the sky. A group of 10 managers are meeting in a room above a beachside café, with wide windows opening onto the sea. The group have met each month for the past year in different locations. Today is the penultimate meeting of this inquiry group, which is part of a national management development programme for managers in, or connected with, the public service. In a few weeks time they will be participating in a final "shared event" where they will report to each other and to sponsors of the

programme and other interested attendees[1] on what they have been doing and what they think they have learned. In preparation for this, the group's task is to try and devise a way to communicate what it has been doing. Like everyone else, I feel a sense of the pressure to 'deliver' – to try to show that the process we have been engaged in has been worthwhile. So I ask the group to begin working in consultancy triads[2] to try and articulate what they thought they had learned and were taking away with them. They capture these thoughts on flipcharts dotted around the wall. This is a high-energy task, and I feel a sense of upbeat enjoyment in the room.

Frame: Our process

In this paper we are aiming to show the approach to action research that has developed at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) since its formal inception almost 15 years ago. We do this by drawing on examples of our own experience of action research using two accounts, which we have formed in the writing of this paper. These represent for us something of the range of action research practices that are carried out at CARPP. The inquiries described differ in scale, situation and purpose. And our experience of action research differs too: one of us is a relative newcomer whilst the other has considerable experience. Yet working on our accounts in tandem yielded many enjoyable points of confluence and it was from these that we began to evolve our description.

Writing this paper is the first time we have come together as colleagues to work on something. We have tried to enact our principles in our process, because that is one of the things that CARPP does. So we have done our best to work collaboratively, honouring the different experiences and backgrounds we are bringing to this task. We have met regularly to talk and made audio recordings of our conversations. Having spoken the stories of our practice to each other, we transcribed the recordings, and used these as a basis to identify

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[1] The programme was designed by CARPP Fellows Chris Seely and Sue Porter. It sought to make connections between the work of the inquiry groups and the sponsors and other key stakeholders in or related to the public sector by holding three participatory conferences, called "shared events", during the 15 months of the programme.

[2] Three people, one talks, one listens, one observes and time keeps, and then the roles are revolved three times.

themes, which we have then reflected on and explored together. This is not in any way a comprehensive account – we imagine that any of our colleagues could have produced one that was both similar and different – but simply an attempt to show some characteristics of our work that we consider important.

Background of CARPP

CARPP was established as a research centre in 1993, within the School of Management at the University of Bath by Professors Peter Reason and Judi Marshall, both of whom already had strongly established track-records in action-oriented and participative ways of conducting research and postgraduate education. Through CARPP they created a postgraduate programme in Action Research, which offered adult learners an opportunity to take a structured, group-based learning programme leading to a Diploma, MPhil and PhD using action research. In 1997, together with Gill Coleman, they established the MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice (RBP), a two-year part-time course, which is designed with action research central to its philosophy and practice (see Marshall 2004; Reason 2007 for fuller descriptions). There is also a programme of open workshops offered several times a year on topics of theoretical and practical interest,[3] including a very popular course on facilitation skills.[4] Graduates and participants from these programmes – who have considerable work-and-life experience before coming to CARPP – have given rise to a growing community of collaborators and colleagues, some of whom are attached to the Centre as Visiting Fellows, and some of whom have a more episodic relationship. As this shifting group has begun to experiment with ways of interacting and organising itself, in recent years CARPP has started to undertake action research projects, both for client organisations and as scholarly research.

This group of people is held in relationship with each other through an adherence to the principles of action research as expressed by the Centre, and

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[3]   For example, Universal Patterns of Change, exploring the Mandala Principle; Narrative and Story-telling; Action Research and Scale.

[4]   Run by Jenny Mackewn, CARPP Visiting Fellow.

developed by its graduates in their own work. When describing our approach to action research we often say: we integrate action and reflection, to find knowledge that is directly relevant to the issue being studied, through processes that increase collaboration between all involved. We try and help people develop reflective practice, and link with others to form communities of inquiry.[5] The purpose of our work is also very important to us. Reason and Bradbury (2001: 1.) have described it as being concerned with "*worthwhile human purposes*" and the "*flourishing of individual persons and their communities*". We are increasingly orienting our activities towards the challenge of sustainability – concerned with issues of climate change, social justice, poverty and exclusion – aiming to contribute to the movement for social, organizational, and personal change that is needed if we and our planet are to flourish.

CARPP's approach is eclectic – these principles are enacted slightly differently in each community of inquiry, as will be shown by the stories presented here. This is not, however, a casual approach to action research. On the contrary, there are strong thematic similarities between our varied situations of inquiry, and the challenge of defining quality remains at least as arduous as in any other form of research. In this paper we draw some of these recurring themes into an argument, a propositional view (Heron/Reason 2001) of what constitutes our approach to inquiry – one that emphasises the creation and holding of 'different' space and the action that can arise from it. Running alongside this is a complementary presentation, drawing on our shared belief in the value of many ways of knowing (Heron/Reason 1997). We offer journal entries, descriptive passages and excerpts from our taped inquiry in what we might call a storied form. The stories tell something that the commentary does not: they evoke and re-present the 'felt' presence of the moment. This play between narrative and commentary is an exploration of an alternative form of presentational knowing (Heron/Reason 2001). A challenge for us, as authors, has been resisting the urge to explain in the commentary, that which is amply and richly evoked by these stories.

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[5]   CARPP website www.bath.ac.uk/carpp.

Story 1: The evening progresses

M: The workshop is in full flow now and I notice how the energy ranges from laughter and animation during group exercises, to quiet scholarly effort as the group tries to take in the principles of cycles of action and reflection that I describe. In small groups the women discuss their varied work-life situations and a lot of exchange and discussion is being fuelled by the diversity of the group. In a final crescendo they start to question what they seek by coming here. It takes the form of a lively brainstorm and suddenly someone goes to the board and starts grouping the 'stickies' we have created. She then impromptu presents the set of themes that have emerged, which to me seem rich and full of possibility. I look at it all and feel utterly spent – "What have I started?" I think to myself, "And how can I do justice to it all?" I feel humbled by what the group has so earnestly created. Acknowledging that the expressive inquiry I sought does seem to be taking place, my concerns shift now to how I might sustain it. I take the flipchart with all the themes home and the next day, kneeling on my living room floor, I stare at it, wondering how to make sense of it. I am used to delivering projects, 'dealing with' issues. This feels entirely different. Reaching out to organise the 'stickies' put by group members on the flipchart, I pause. No – this is not my role this time, I realise. I am not there to do the sense-making for the group. I leave the themes as originally created, learning in the process that this kind of facilitation is as much about letting go as it is about control.

Story 2: AR with managers.

G: I was working with this group as part of a large-scale action research programme that was being run in collaboration with a government sponsored management development agency. This group was one of 9 parallel groups, of 8-12 people, clustered around key public service policy areas.[6] Each inquiry group met monthly for 9 months and was facilitated by a member of a consortium led by CARPP.

All the members of this group worked in the same broad field, but in very different capacities, varying from advising on statutory responsibilities in the health service, to ensuring government compliance in its employment practices, to working on behalf of disadvantaged communities. Their work

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6 For instance: health improvement, community cohesion, children and young people, integrated transport, strategy for older people, life long learning.

together had included a variety of activities that I introduced, to try and enable them to inquire into what they do, and consider how they might do it more 'effectively', and how they might judge that effectiveness.

Although the use of explicit action research theory was minimal, the group had been *doing* action research, by engaging in clear and intentional cycles of action, individually and with colleagues (between group meetings) and reflection (at the meetings), which have built on each other over the months. At the outset, I introduced them to the ideas of 'nested' levels of inquiry, simultaneously paying attention to their own individual intentions and actions, to how they as a small group might build connection and collaboration, and to how they might extend this action into their work groups and wider organisational contexts. So at times the focus had been very personal, and sometimes emotional, and at others quite strategic and procedural. I had suggested to the group that being an action researcher means 'researching your own work' (McNiff 2002) – looking at it with a new interest, developing your curiosity, wondering about things you were taking for granted. I asked them to try and develop, in the group, a quality of exploration, sharing and thinking that they could not do elsewhere – actively to try and enable the inquiry group make a distinctive contribution to their lives.

We worked with some different ways of knowing, to try and move away from the constraints of the limited organisational language in which most of their working lives were conducted. These included story circles,[7] creating appreciative visions (Whitney/Trosten-Bloom 2003) using drawing and collage-building (Bunker/Alban 1997) and free-fall writing (Turner-Vesselago 1995). They had also been making use of personal reflective journals, tracking and exploring their thoughts and feelings in writing over the course of the year.

The idea of 'Different [& Emancipatory] Space'

As we have thought about what we do, we have increasingly been struck by the important role played in our work by the creation of *space*. This includes

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[7] A simple process of telling a 2-3 minute story to each other, while sitting in a circle and listening attentively. CARPP is indebted Theresa Holden at the Leadership for a Changing World Project, Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University, for introducing us to this activity.

physical space – a place to be together; conceptual space, where diverse ideas are brought into play – this might draw on philosophy, ecology, organizational change theory, complexity theory, systemic thinking and other literatures; and emotional space, where the inquirers may articulate their feelings about what they are doing. As action researcher/facilitators, our role is to create these spaces that aspire to be qualitatively *different* from that which is around them, and to maintain the conditions under which inquiry can take place within them.

We describe below three key features of these different spaces. Then by noting how these features link to the possibility for new choices, we identify a fourth quality that addresses questions of how, when and where different actions might arise from this kind of practice of action research.

1. Bounded and distinctive

In Story 1, M created a boundary by making invitations, and by contracting with people at the first session about the nature of their involvement and the time commitment. In Story 2 the participants had committed themselves to a programme of monthly meetings over a year, and G spent time with them at the outset on their contract with each other[8]. We frequently use 'check-ins' and other facilitation techniques to mark the boundary between the reflective, inquiring space and the rest of the world. One aspect of this boundary is to mark an entry into, and exit from, a place where expectations and ways of relating to each other are not as they would be in an ordinary 'meeting'. Another is to create safety inside it, and as practitioners we foster this by engendering a sense of mutual support. Each inquirer is listened to, encouraged to share their experiences and develop their own sense-making processes. This is often commented upon by participants. When asked in what way the workshops had helped her address her own questions, a group participant in Story 1 wrote:

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[8]   The contract agreed by group:followed the prompt: What will help us learn together? Safety, Respect, Being Non-judgemental, Sharing skills, Being interactive, Active listening, Nobody dominating, everyone contributing, Being supported and supporting others, Confidentiality, Trust, Commitment and responsibility, Giving time, Making mistakes, Having fun, Mentoring, Having a learning outcome in mind.

> I always find discussion useful, both listening to the dilemmas of others –
> I became a much better listener! – and airing my own feelings. It was a
> safe environment in which to do so.
> (Participant, Story 1 in written feedback about Work-life Series1).

The simple act of making space for participants to talk to each other is a fundamental part of the CARPP practice – and powerful in its effect on people.

Within that supportive environment, we also seek to offer a challenge to inquire into what is being taken for granted or not said. We see this as finding a balance between "*friends willing to act as enemies*" (Torbert 1976) and "*friends willing to act as friends*" (Marshall 2001.) So the space not only looks physically distinctive – you can tell a CARPP graduate group at work in the School of Management because of the absence of rows of desks and the presence of posters and drawings on the wall and flowers in the room – it is intentionally set up to 'feel' different.

2. *Internal and external validation*

Our 'different spaces' are bounded and distinguish themselves then from the institutions or social environments in which they are set. And whilst we have noted how participants experience mutual validation within the space, our analysis has also highlighted how externally derived validation is important in helping participants make sense of it and carry what they have learned outwards from it.

It is of relevance to note that the inquiry spaces are set up against a background that, on some level, endorses them. This endorsement is vital in helping participants attach to the spaces some sense of familiar legitimacy. In general, CARPP's location inside a leading UK school of management confers credibility on the action research we do there and this applies to the spaces, different though they may be, that are convened under its umbrella. In Story 1, participants at the Work-life meetings 'understood' themselves to be participating in university-based research. They appreciated that action research was a different but legitimate form of research. In Story 2, participants 'understood' that they were part of a government-sponsored programme, the commissioning of which gave a clear message that action research was a good thing to

do. This external validation allowed them to suspend their scepticism long e-nough to experience the power of being listened to.

As well as endorsing the research, external validation can be actively expressed as a demand for an evaluative outcome that is understandable to the hosting institutional or social setting. Such expressions vary considerably depending on the setting of the inquiry, and this plays an important role in how participants bridge the gap between the safe space of the inquiry and the rest of their lives. Participants in Story 1 carried away actions on business cards at the end of each workshop. Reflection on how they had carried out the actions then took the form of a paired discussion at the start of the next session and this sometimes involved a guilty admission that the card had remained untouched in the intervening period. This gentler hint of accountability contrasts with the more active request on the MSc that, in order to validate their 3-monthly cycles of inquiry, students write learning papers outlining and reflecting on their actions between sessions. External validation takes a different form again in Story 2, where participants were required to explain what they had learned in terms that would have legitimacy within their particular institutional setting.

Validity – whether internally occurring in the inquiry space or externally proffered or demanded – gives a foundation to the felt safety of the different space and is important in helping participants fully to engage with it. As we have touched on, and will expand upon later, it also plays an important role in how much participants feel able to translate new possibilities in the space to the rest of their lives.

3. Ebb and flow over time

The space is underpinned by an ebb and flow of experimental *action and reflection* that is iterative and deepened over time. People consciously move in and out of these cycles. There is a rhythm to this process that is often *felt* by participants rather than conceptually understood. As we create action research interventions we try actively to build in an experience of this process. We have noticed that the timing and timespan of these cycles of inquiry seems to be significant. Feedback from participants involved in different communities

of inquiry suggests that whilst they appear to adapt quickly to the 'different space', the depth of experience grows over time. After just four 2- hour workshops a participant in Story 1 reported:

> I enjoyed doing the collage. It was very liberating to do something that seemed (almost) selfish; not considering anyone else in this artistic summary of yourself and your dreams and ambitions was not only pleasurable but also enlightening.
> (Work-life inquiry participant, Feedback after series 1)

In Story 2, participants who had now attended eight day-long meetings, could start to articulate how what they were experiencing in the inquiry setting was impacting their work and lives. Things they noted they had done included:

> Invited others to organise/facilitate activities rather than simply inviting as a passive recipient
> Carried out public engagement event involving 6 public bodies
> Accept value in reflection time – feel more comfortable rather than seeing it as a time-wasting activity.
> Taking time to discuss … issues with peers and fellow "influencers"
> Emphasis in our roles on influencing rather than doing for others[9]

The most realised form of this approach is in our RBP MSc programme where eight week-long workshops over two years form opportunities for the acquisition of new ideas and collective sense-making, while between each workshop participants undertake action-experiments in their work/life environments and write learning papers about them. This matching of form and content (Marshall 2004) offers participants an analogic knowing, a felt experience that matches the conceptual model they are taught. At its best, this iterative process adds dynamism to the 'space' – so that the safety that is created there is in service to the action that it generates outside. Many of the MSc participants feel this potently as they move towards the end of their two-year experience:

> "I have a strong guiding principle…but before this course I did not know how to put it into practice. This is what the course has done. It has pro-

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[9] From flipcharts of what participants had done/were doing differently as a result of the group.

vided me with an opportunity to put my part of it into practice. I can be a small part of the path towards my vision…this is such an intuitive way of looking at things, but it required me to take a huge leap to realize this" (MSc participant, learning review[10] extract)

Similar references to freedom, realisation and self-acceptance recur time and again in participant feedback and learning papers. This emancipatory potential of the space appears to be central in making the move from the reflective space to action for change elsewhere. This liberatory quality is echoed below in M's account of what enabled her to take the step in doing action research with others to explore what mattered to her most.

Story 1: An emancipatory journey[11]

> **M:** I picked up on the energy of CARPP right from the Open Day[12] … The way people were really engaged and how they were talking was a contrast to my work environment which felt so….monochromatic. One of the tutors there had a book on Zen philosophy that she had borrowed from a colleague and that intrigued me – no more than that – it made me hopeful. In the interview I said I thought I didn't fit the mould, but the interviewer said "there is no mould here".
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> **M:** When I started the MSc it took me a while to 'get' inquiry – I suppose I was a bit sceptical as to what was different about it. Then my husband and I were talking about what I'd do for a first year learning paper and I said "look, I think I'm just going to try to live differently for the summer – switch my brain off – and experiment". So it was a move into experiential knowing – something I really needed to do – and it was a leap of faith … though the worst thing that could happen would be that I'd produce a lousy learning paper. As it turned out it was a landmark set of three months. I wrote poems, I attended all kinds of meetings – seminars, activ-

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[10] A learning review is submitted along with the MSc thesis at the end of the two year programme. In it students reflect on their learning over the duration of the course.

[11] Excerpts drawn from taped co-inquiry session in Feb 2007 where G prompted M to speak about her MSc experience.

[12] A meeting of prospective participants and staff held several times each year prior to the start of the MSc in RBP: there is both a group discussion about the course, and individual discussions between applicants and staff.

ist gatherings, storytelling sessions – and I drew extraordinary pictures that just came out of me. I became very, very alive in that time and I think that's when I really got a sense of inquiry – it was like reconnecting back to a creative impulse that had been put under wraps for so long.

M: After that I did some work on complexity theory and meaningful work. It was a scary time. I was groping toward a new future, not knowing what it was, and I was leaving the engineering world I'd come from further and further behind. But there was a strong sense of freedom coming with that – and possibility. Increasingly I was finding myself connecting with other people who were interested in what I was doing and the questions I was asking – mostly women who are also searching in a strange quiet way. I couldn't bear sometimes to hear how some of them put themselves down. I was having so many informal conversations, and I said to myself, "look just do it – take another leap" so I decided to set up and run a Co-operative Inquiry which I called "My Work – My Life".

M: I'd never have done it outside the context of the MSc. We were constantly being asked to 'show' our practices in first-, second- and even third- person inquiry. And we were encouraged too to experiment. So the MSc process held me really – simultaneously supporting and challenging me. And, as important, it showed me how to go about it. You experience second person inquiry over and over again on the MSc. I could draw on all that when it came to starting my own inquiry group.

M: It was surprisingly easy to attract people to that first kick-off meeting. I created a flyer describing the inquiry and passed it out among friends and acquaintances. Those who expressed interest were then asked to invite another person who might also be interested. I had to turn people away from that first meeting. It was an exciting time. That first set of workshops then ran for 6 months at the end of which a group of 5 of us decided to go ahead for a second series of more action-oriented workshops.

The challenges of how to express this kind of learning outside the 'space', however, are real.

Story 2: Tensions on moving out

G: Having articulated what they had learned, I then ask the group to discuss how it wants to present these 'take-aways' back to the other groups and the other stakeholders– and the atmosphere seems to change. People

work in pairs, and then discuss their thoughts as a whole group. The sense of excitement that came with naming their learning and noticing the changes they have made in how they do their work has ebbed away. One person (who has a theatrical background) proposes doing a short perform-ance together, along the lines of Forum Theatre (Boal 2000), to try and engage the audience in the understanding they have developed, that good quality service delivery will be brought about through the increased in-volvement and participation of all people in the decisions that are made about them by public agencies. Others agree half-heartedly with the sug-gestion, and in the absence of alternatives they start to discuss how they might do this. But I doubt their commitment to it, and I decide to test my doubt. I suggest they try it out there and then, instead of talking about it. Only the person who proposed it gets up from her seat to do so. Now I get a sense of unease in the room – silences, hesitation, lack of eye contact be-tween people. Time is ticking away, and there is no plan, no agreement about what to say, or how to say it or show it. So I share this with them: "I am not sure exactly what is going on now, but I can feel your reluctance. It's almost as if you were frightened. Am I the only one who is picking this up? What could this be about?" More silence, then one person says: "I just couldn't do that – I just wouldn't have the nerve to 'act' in front of those other people. I would feel too silly". Another says "It's not what people expect, or look for at the end of something like this: they expect tangible outcomes, that's what we need to show." A third adds "it feels like really more than my job is worth to go out there and make a fool of myself: you get slapped down if you stick your neck out." I remind them of the three interconnected levels at which they have been trying to work – paying attention to 'me', 'us' and 'them'. "It feels to me", I say, "as if 'they' are here in this room, and your expectation of what they want is stopping you from finding a way of saying what you want to say. What about the things you have put on the flip charts? Aren't these real, tangible outcomes? How will your colleagues know about them if you don't tell them?" More silence. Then someone says "We may feel anxious, so we have to find a safer way to tell them what we want them to know" and someone else says "We've got a lot to say, we just need to find the right way to do it" and gradually they find a solution – to make 'headlines' from their flipcharted lists, which they will project from a computer onto a backdrop screen, whilst one or two of them say a bit about the experience of the inquiry group. The meeting ends with preparation work still to do, but some ideas of what the form and tone of the communication will be.

4. Emancipatory potential: The link to different action

The three features of the different space we have highlighted contribute over-all to a potential for emancipation, a term we use here lightly to describe experiences of freedom, openness and liberation that participants have reported. As action researchers we aim to work inside the boundary we have created, holding open its distinctive features of participation, safety and egalitarianism. Sub-texts, assumptions, personal patterns and tacit knowing which is not normally talked about is brought into awareness and opened up for reflection – and the boundaries of *what might be done* are pushed outwards. In this way a sense of agency is nurtured into being. Though significantly different in context, this process has echoes of Freire's "conscientization" (1972), the point at which the individual becomes engaged in a radical owning and re-naming of personal experience. The emancipatory potential of the space as we have described it, is then linked also to a potential for action.

The process through which individuals are able to realize this potential as new action outside the space is a delicate one. Time, practice and the quality of the space itself are clearly factors. Over time, and with repeated iterations of the action-reflection cycles participants practise these different ways of being, so that they become familiar and 'normal' to them. But in our experience, con-textual factors can also actively encourage or squash such potential. M, in Story 1, was encouraged into action by her participation on the RBP MSc. Not only did her instigation of the co-operative inquiry have legitimacy within the course, her work was being evaluated against formal assessment criteria that af-firmed such a step. Story 2, by contrast, shows the need to report back to the commissioning sponsors had connotations of evaluation, but against implicit criteria set by the organisational culture in which the programme was set. In this case, as Story 2 described, it caused considerable tensions for participants as they struggled to find a way legitimately to describe what they were doing. Whereas M reported "*constantly being asked to 'show' her practices*", a participant in G's group worried about having *"the nerve to 'act' in front of those other people"*.

As we have tried to show through the stories, the detailed *micro-practice* that enables people to connect their own action to a wider social and political context, and experiment with alternative action to the point at which they can

take it forward, is a crucial aspect of this type of action research, and one that is seldom discussed in the literature.

Connecting micro-practice 'in here' to practice 'out there'

We do this by linking 'first person', 'second person; and 'third person' action research practices (Reason/Bradbury 2001; Reason/McArdle 2004.) First-person approaches are usually the beginning point of our work: they enable people to adopt an inquiring approach to their own lives, so that they can be more aware of the choices they are making and the effects they are having on those around them. (Marshall 1999, 2001.) Both stories refer to these – journaling, reflective conversations, mindful meditation, freefall writing, drawing, using a Learning Pathways Grid (Rudolph et al. 2001) and others. Simple as they sound, such practices are often met with resistance, because the separation of the 'private' and 'public' sphere in advanced capitalist societies is so pervasive that anything deemed personal is felt as an uncomfortable intrusion into the world of work (Fletcher 1999) or to be self-indulgent (Sparkes 2002.) We hold to the importance of this re-introduction of the personal, as an expression of wholeness, an acknowledgement of reflexivity in action research, and also the site for critical reflection – to which we will return below. 'Second-person' action research is working with others, to explore shared questions, make sense of them together, and devise actions together. From the stories above, it is possible to see the importance our approach attaches to the idea of co-working – and also the detailed groundwork that is needed to try and realise in practice the simple idea of "collaboration". We believe that action research is participative, it is something done *with* people not *on* people. Sometimes we use formalised ways of doing this, like the Co-operative Inquiry conducted by M in Story 1 (Heron/Reason 2001; Heron 1996), but there are also more informal ways of creating participation, many of which we use – consultancy triads, walk-and-talk in twos and threes, working together on pictures and collages, Open Space (Owen 1997) and so on.

'Third-person' research includes a range of approaches that have the purpose of raising questions, creating interconnections and fostering inquiring conversations between larger groups (Gustavsen 2003a, 2003b). Although

this has not been in the past a central part of CARPP's work, we are increasingly looking for ways to create larger scale dialogue processes and facilitate network-building between groups we work with more intensively. This idea can be seen in the reference to a 'shared event' in Story 2. It is also an aspect of our work with the RBP MSc, where 10 years of graduates are now organising themselves into a lively network involving virtual conversations and real, tangible help around their shared interests and inquiries in sustainability and corporate social responsibility. They increasingly see themselves as a community of inquiry in their own right.

Links to theory

Since we have concentrated on practice in this account, we can do no more here than briefly indicate some of our theoretical groundings, and point to sources for further discussion. We have already described CARPP's approach as eclectic, and, as a community of scholar/practitioners we draw on many sources of ideas. We will mention three here, that to us seem to have particular relevance for the concepts of 'different space' and 'emancipatory potential' as we have been discussing them. They are critical theory, Foucault's concept of power patterns that are routinised through 'micropractices', and feminist thinking on the politics of the personal.

Ideas of emancipation speak directly to CARPP's intention to foster critical and political awareness among participants that will ultimately lead to different action. This places our practice close to what Kemmis (2001: 92), describes as 'critical action research', which seeks to free people from: "*determination by habit, custom, illusion, and coercion which sometimes frame and constrain social and educational practice*".

Kemmis draws on Habermas' (1984, 1987), theory of 'communicative action', which interrogates the relationship between people's subjective and intersubjective 'lifeworld' –and their experience of the economic and political 'system'. The task of critical action research, then, is to "*explore and address the interconnections and tensions between system and lifeworld aspects of a setting as they are lived out in practice*" (ibid.) Habermas's notion of 'communicative space' captures the tight and often paradoxical interlinking of nar-

ratives of personal experience and context-setting frameworks of power with which we often work. Kemmis comments:

> "The first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space…and to do so in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do, in the knowledge that the legitimacy of any conclusions and decisions reached by participants will be proportional to the degree of authentic engagement of those concerned" (Kemmis 2001: 100).

We do not assume that authentic engagement arises simply – part of our practice is to tune into the energy of the space, noticing the atmosphere, sometimes intervening, sometimes persevering to attain such engagement, knowing that with it comes greater potential. As we have said elsewhere in this paper, the extent to which we are able to realize this seems to be most explicit in the more extended form of the RBP MSc – reflected in these recent comments from students who are finishing the course:

> "my time on [the course] has opened my eyes. I see more of the way the capitalist economic system works, and the associated rhetoric. For example, wealth creation is talked about as a universal positive. My position now is to be much more questioning – wealth for who? With what consequences? While I feel I am in deep, and constantly learning, I also feel that my influence is growing, at least on my 'good days'"
> (learning review extract, participant who is a senior practitioner with a professional services consultancy)

> "I am striving to develop a participatory worldview with an integrated spirituality for my own life. During the past two years … I believe I have made significant progress in this objective thanks to our commitment as a group to public reason, reading, creative writing, meditation, humour, tears, lots of challenges and respect for the dignity of difference"
> (learning review extract, participant who is director of a human rights non-profit organization in Nigeria)

We draw also on Foucualt's thinking about what he calls the 'microphysics' of power – the everyday and mundane ways in which structures of power *"reach in to the very grain of individuals"* (Gordon 1980: 39) and are thereby maintained and reproduced . This idea has been widely discussed and developed (Fraser 1989; Clegg 1994; Lukes 2005) but is not often explicitly linked

to the practices of first person action research. The reflective processes of first person work enable assumptions to be reviewed and patterns questioned, so that the apparently insignificant acts through which people together hold "regimes of truth" in place can come to awareness. If Kemmis's view of critical action research seeks to create dialogic arenas in which matters of political concern can be debated and agreed, Foucault alerts us to the difficulties of creating this kind of openness, and by implication points to the subtleties of the 'normalized' processes through which some voices are routinely muted and others shine through. Reflective space and procedures for validation of personal stances, from this perspective, are seen as politicised processes, where disciplinary routines of self-denigration or self-silencing are unpicked, and new strategies of expression may be practised. Much of Foucault's writing is unclear as to where regimes of power stop and human agency begins (Lukes 2005) – and we are not making a claim that our work in some way steps outside the power systems of which we are a part – but we recognise that the apparently personal, seemingly small "micropractice' of our work is suffused with political implications. As Marshall writes:

> "Who researches and how; whose experience is researched and how that is named or categorised; what discourses gain currency and hold power; what forms of inquiry and writing are favoured by mainstream power-holders; and much more are political issues. "Creating knowledge" is political business. Living practice is thus politicised" (Marshall 1999: 158).

There are clearly links here to other traditions of relational work and consciousness-raising, including those associated with the feminism, where connections between the personal and political are often explicitly made (Kemp/ Squires 1997; Fletcher 1999.) We consider this to be demanding action research practice, in which we seek to realise the possibility for what Goldberger et al. (1987: 218) describe as *"really talking"* which *"reaches deep into the experience of each; it also draws on the analytical abilities of each ... domination is absent; reciprocity and co-operation predominate."*

Enduring consequences?

So, what does this attention to the qualities of small spaces for reflection and collaboration amount to? As we believe the stories show, much of our effort

goes into creating and sustaining the space – demarcating it, validating it, and demonstrating through what we do, as much as by what we say, possible ways to work within it and beyond. What can we say about the effect that this has? Reason and Bradbury (2001: 450) suggest five useful dimensions of quality that might be used to assess action research, the last two of which are questions about the significance of what is being done, and the possibility of it leading to enduring consequences. How can we recognise such possibility? Consequence in our thinking is not directly derived from a chain of linear cause and effect but is rather described as a complex overlap of probabilities, chance and possibility. In linking our practice to outcome, then, we do so cautiously and have described it tentatively as a process of nurturing a potential into action, from which change of some significance may arise.

This caution notwithstanding, there is evidence to support the view that CARPP's work has been of consequence and affected many people in significant and life-changing ways over its history (including both the authors of this paper).

– First, CARPP itself continues to thrive. Its programmes attract increasing numbers of students – the 11th MSc intake has increased in size this year due to demand – and PhDs from the Centre account for well over half those completed at the School of Management, making a significant contribution to scholarship and action. With this has come increasing recognition of the Centre's influence. The external examiner at a recent Examination Board commented on the positive social action being undertaken by students from the programme. A recent Harvard Business Review article described the MSc as "*a path –breaking programme…one of the few found around the globe*" that nurtures a different and creative form of leadership (Rooke/Torbert 2005).

– Second, it is through the actions and achievements of the graduates from the MSc that the impact of our kind of action research can best be understood. Through the years students have influenced their organisations and communities in a variety of ways that range from confronting the CEO of a major multi-national company with difficult questions to stealthily placing water-conservation bricks in the cisterns of the works' toilets. Both

examples are not isolated, but part of a richer tapestry of connected actions and happenings. The difficult questions led to the CEO's interest and his subsequent request for a proposal; the stealth water-conservation work was part of a wider campaign of such actions. A recent graduate has used collaborative action research in the Niger delta to connect executives of a major oil company and local militants. Another has conducted an inquiry with people in the music industry to consider ecological issues in the construction of a low-emissions guitar amplifier. A third has used reflective inquiry techniques to help their employer, a large financial organisation, confront their role in the creation and maintenance of personal debt. Over the years graduates have also set up enterprises with others: a network of sustainability practitioners, a consultancy partnership, a non-governmental organisation lobbying for carbon disclosure, an environmental travel company, the first UK village to commit itself to going carbon neutral. All these and more examples like them involve MSc graduates many of whom have reported that their experiences in CARPP enabled them to act in a way that reflects their own potential, values and sense of possibility within a heightened awareness of the systemic complexity and larger ecological and political context within which they are situated. [13]

With a move towards larger research-council funded and client-sponsored programmes, at the Centre we are in an active process of building our own capacity. As we continue to explore the connections between our approach to action research and that of those working with large-scale participative processes, we believe some fruitful work will lie ahead.

Closing scenes
Story 1: A later workshop

> **M's Journal – Feb 2006 (10 months after the first workshop)**
>
> Last night we had the third workshop in Series 2 of the work-life sessions. One person was ill – so there were only four of us. I felt concerned. Some-

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[13] This refers to provisional data coming out of ongoing research at the Centre into the impact of the MSc on participant's lives and work.

times it's as though the walls are starting to close in from all sides on this space that is now so precious. But we went ahead and I'm glad we did because we had this fabulous session where real real things happened and were said – it felt like we arrived on a new level. . At the beginning I'd disclosed my desire to be involved and escape the facilitator role. By the end I really was fully involved – a true participant – people do remember what you voice. Before tonight I'd felt slightly unhinged by my MSc write-up being done. I was wondering what does this inquiry mean now that I won't be writing it up? It was as if I'd lost my stabilizers – but then I found I could still ride the bike!

Feb 2007: Reflections[14]

G: So what did starting this inquiry group enable you to learn, that, if you had sat behind a desk…and read and done a conventional thesis, you would not have found out?

M: Oh It was a vastly different learning experience: the challenge of sitting down in front of a group of people and trying to articulate something and retain conviction in what one is saying…whilst still trying to hold the space open… was a completely new learning for me.

G: And as a group, what did it enable you to do or say differently?

M: Well I think the group surfaced a lot of questions about guilt and validity. So the simple act of women voicing what they do and what is important to them and experiencing support from other participants when they do that is very affirming. In terms of outcome – I don't know – there started to be more sustained repercussions during the Series 2 workshops: one person started music and is still doing it, another wanted to be a writer and made space in her life for that. Two of the participants made quite major changes toward more fulfilling work lives during or quite soon after the workshops. I know too that one participant had really deep, questioning conversations with others as a result – so she took a difference out there I am not sure what 'outcomes' are, what you can point at so specifically – I could ask the participants now, but that isn't it, is it?

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[14]   Feb 2007. Drawn from taped co-inquiry session.

Story 2: The event

> The day arrives and there are more than a hundred people in the room. My time of active facilitation is over, now I am here to listen and learn, like everyone else. The group I have been working with has prepared a set of questions to ask of their colleagues from the other groups, as a way to try and convey what they have learned. Nervously taking their turn alongside the others, they make a short presentation, and then they use the power-point projector to ask:

> "Do you treat meeting targets as a tick-box exercise?
> Are you just going through the motions?
> Are you proud of your values and beliefs?
> Do you accept the values and beliefs of others?
> How do you agitate for change?
> Do you take time to discuss policy issues with your colleagues?

> What help do you need to understand better? Is it up to you?"

> Then as they finish, they ask everyone in the room to change shoes with the person sitting next to them: to embarrassed laughter one of them says to the audience "Its okay, you don't actually have to do it, but we wanted to show you the idea of "imagining yourself in someone else's shoes" – and how you can find out things by experiencing them for yourself."

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